

## in every universe, in every timeline, always them by dustingspace

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - College/University, Apartment AU, Chicago (City), College, Diners, F/M, Fluff, Innuendo, Underage Drinking, i refuse to think they wont ever not be best friends so, max and el being wonderful best friends because its gonna be canon just you wait, these tags are bad just read the summary

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-01-02

**Updated:** 2018-01-22

**Packaged:** 2022-04-20 16:28:27

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 7

**Words:** 34,802

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

“I think, even in another life or an alternate universe or – or anywhere, at any time – I think we would have met.” Mike said, staring down at their fingers, tangled together.

“Like fate?” El asked, and Mike looked up at her.

“Destiny.”

## 1. diners (not drive-ins, or dives)

“I think, even in another life or an alternate universe or – or anywhere, at any time – I think we would have met.” Mike said, staring down at their fingers, tangled together.

“Like fate?” El asked, and Mike looked up at her.

“Destiny.”

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“Are you fucking kidding me?” Max muttered, shoving the change left on the table in her pocket. “Two dollar tip. In *quarters*.”

“God, we are slow.” El huffed, leaning against the counter with a rag in her hand. Behind her, in the kitchen, Dustin was flipping a burger for their only customer; some kid about their age sitting at the end of the bar.

“More coffee?” Max asked him, and he nodded and slid his cup forward.

“Thanks.” He grinned, tapping his fingers on the counter. “I’ll make sure to leave you more than two dollars. And bills, not coins.”

Max blushed and set the coffee pot aside, leaning across the counter. “What’s your name?”

“Lucas.” He smiled, holding a hand out to her, “And you’re – Maxine?”

“Oh, please.” She waved a hand, rolling her eyes. “Call me Max.”

El sighed and turned around to face Dustin through the window; he was caught up staring at Max, who was now whole-heartedly flirting with Lucas.

“Dustin, *he-llo?* Burger, please?” El asked, reaching a hand up to fix her scrunchie. “Come on.”

“Sorry. Sorry.” Dustin muttered, sliding a plate to her. “I – you know.”

“Dustin – we’re all leaving at the end of the summer. You’ve got to get your shit together.” El mumbled, knowing very well that even she didn’t have her own shit together.

The three of them, all from Hawkins, had gotten internships in Chicago for the summer. So here they were, waiting tables and cooking burgers while interning at newspapers (Max, who was a hard-edged journalist), some engineering company (Dustin, who would spit a physics fact at you as soon as you did something slightly science-y), and the social work office downtown (El, who felt such a connection to helping kids that you would think she still was one).

They were sharing a studio apartment in the middle of the city, but they were all happy and making it work. So why would they complain?

El could think of about twenty reasons to complain right now. But she wouldn’t.

Not out loud, at least.

It’d been ridiculously slow all day, and El can barely keep her eyes open without any customers. She’s been cleaning tables and counters that are already clean, brewing fresh cheap coffee when the old stuff is still good, and –

*Cling cling.*

El glanced up, but her gaze stuck.

*Oh*, she thought, turning around quickly to hide the blush she felt creeping up her neck and onto her cheeks. *Shit.*

The boy slid into a barstool next to Lucas, and El turned around to see them sliding their palms together in a handshake.

“What can I get for you?” Max asked, lifting her notepad. The boy held a hand up (long, pale fingers smudged with – what, charcoal? – oh god, he was probably an art student or something – he probably went to whatever university the other guy went to – out of her league, out of her league, *out of her league*) and waved it.

“Just a coffee.” He smiled, but Lucas shook his head.

“I’m buying. Get whatever you want, Mike.”

“Nah, really. It’s cool.” He shrugged, slipping off his jacket and draping it over the back of his seat.

“My treat.” Lucas offered once more, but Mike shook his head.

“Alright. One coffee, El.” Max said, slipping the notepad back into her apron. “Do you have that burger?”

“What?” El asked, staring wide-eyed at her. “Oh! Sorry.” She muttered, handing the burger over to Max. She slid it in front of Lucas and walked over to El, making a wide-eyed face at her.

“Earth to El, earth to El. Wanna get it together?” Max asked, arching her eyebrows up at her. “Coffee.”

El reached for the coffee and poured a quick cup, moving to slid it over to Mike; their fingers brushed.

“Sorry.” He mumbled, blushing and glancing up at her. Lucas pressed his elbow against Mike’s ribs and Mike jolted, reaching a hand across the bar to sputter, “I’m – Mike!”

El practically jumped in surprise. She hesitated before sliding her hand into his (*oh my god*, she thought, feeling his smooth palm against her own, his fingers curling around her hand, *we’re made for each other*) and grinning at him. “I’m El.”

“Sorry.” Lucas apologized, and El glanced over at him. “Mike gets nervous around pretty girls.”

“Shut up.” Mike laughed, and El rolled her eyes at him.

“You shouldn’t flirt with me. You’ll make Max jealous.” El warned him, spinning around on her heel.

“I was saying it on Mike’s behalf!” Lucas called out as El walked back to the window. She heard Mike sputter a curse, and Lucas laughed.

“He’s cute.” Dustin said, leaning through the window slightly. “The one named – wait, holy shit. Mike Wheeler? Mike Wheeler? *MIKE WHEELER!*” Dustin yelled, leaning through the window. “Hey, Mike!”

Mike looked up and stared at Dustin for a moment before gasping, getting up from his seat and walking down the bar. “Dude – Lucas – it’s *Dustin*.”

“Oh my god!” Lucas laughed, standing up and following Mike. “*Dustin Henderson*, is that you?”

“Hell yeah, it is!” Dustin shouted, grinning at the two of them. “I haven’t seen you guys in –”

“Years.” Mike sighed, shaking his head. “You look the same –”

“You guys, too. Just taller.” Dustin laughed, glancing over at the clock and then at the empty restaurant before walking away from the window, and pushing open the door to enter the floor.

Despite his greasy apron and French fry smell, El watched the three boys embrace each other without a beat.

“El, I knew these guys in elementary school. But Lucas and Mike’s dads worked together and both got relocated to Chicago –”

“So we moved but, oh my god, dude, we were just talking about you the other day.” Lucas said, grinning at Dustin, “This is insane –”

“Okay.” Dustin said, slapping his hands against his jeans. “I know what we have to do.”

“What?” Mike asked, smiling like a little kid, “What’s up?”

“Max, El and I are sharing an apartment while we’re in Chicago for the summer. And you guys are coming over for game night.” Dustin

said, and Max groaned as she walked out of the bathroom, flicking her water-covered hands at Dustin.

“Jesus Christ, Dustin.” Max said, glaring at him, “Did you really just invite two other people to our studio apartment?”

“It’s fine.” Dustin said, rolling his eyes. “It’s just for a few hours –”

“El?” Max asked, and El straightened (she’d been staring at Mike’s hands; had she met him before? How did she already feel like –) and nodded.

“I think it’s a great idea.” El replied, beaming at the group.

“So that’s it, then.” Dustin nodded, clasping his hands in front of him, “Tonight, at –”

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Eight o’ clock.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck* – oh my god, *Dustin*, what the *fuck* is wrong with you?!” Max screamed, pointing to the dirty dishes in the sink. “We work at a fucking restaurant! You can wash dishes there, and not here?!”

“Max!” El yelled, slamming her palms down onto the kitchen table (probably the cleanest part of their shithole apartment), “You are not helping!”

“They’re going to be here in like, five fucking minutes and this place looks – it looks like a roach – nest or something –”

“Roaches don’t build nests.” Dustin sighed, turning on the faucet. “They –”

The faucet ruptured, and water started to spray everywhere. Dustin slammed his hand down on the knob and the water stopped.

El grabbed a towel and covered the sink with it.

“If you can’t see it, it isn’t there.” She said, forcing a smile toward

Max.

“Now I have to call the landlord in the morning.” Max whimpered, pressing her hands against her head. “Those guys are going to think we’re *rats* –”

“They’ll think I’m a rat.” Dustin sighed, his eyes heading for the ceiling. “Really, Max, for someone who’s so you I wouldn’t think you would care this much –”

“Lucas is – really, really cute, okay, Dustin?” Max said, slamming a hand down on the table. She lifted her eyes to glare at him, and spat out, “And I want him to like me!”

“Since *when*?!” Dustin squeaked, and El tugged a chair out and sat down in it.

Here they went again: Dustin and Max were always having these weird domestic disputes, because Dustin was totally in love with Max (well – kind of, El thought, frowning, he’d had plenty of girlfriends, but it always seemed like he broke up with them whenever Max got single again) and Max just really loved him as a friend.

El was caught in the middle. Sometimes she considered sleeping on the street to get away from them for a few minutes.

She never did, though. So – baby steps?

Someone knocked on the door.

“Fuck.” El whispered, glancing around their apartment. “Max, you’re right. This is a little embarrassing.”

“Ladies. Ladies. It will be fine.” Dustin sighed, moving toward the door. He flicked the lock and twisted the knob, moving aside to let the door swing open. “Hello, boys.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow at Dustin and took a step inside, Mike ducking his head and following. “Hey, guys. Sweet place. Right in the heart of Chicago.” Lucas said, nodding with approval.

El relaxed in her seat. Mike glanced up and looked toward her; he

caught her gaze and smiled at her.

Her heart melted in her chest for reasons she couldn't explain; but she smiled back, and that was all it took.

Mike sat next to her, and Dustin opened up a box of Monopoly and ordered a pizza.

"I'm a beast at this game." Dustin said, cracking his knuckles. "Here we go."

"Can I be the shoe?" Max asked, though she was already reaching for it. "Lucas?"

"I'll be the top hat." Lucas said. Dustin took the battleship, and Mike glanced over at El.

"What do you want to be?" He asked, his hands folded together in his lap.

"Uh – what do you want to be?" She asked, eyeing the pieces.

"How about we pick for each other?" Mike asked, and El grinned and bit down on her lower lip. She reached for the thimble and slid it into his palm; he picked the dog and handed it to her.

"The dog?" El asked, furrowing her brows.

"Wow, Mike – what are you trying to say?" Max gasped, and Mike flushed pink .

"She's – cute?" Mike said, turning toward El. "Like the dog."

"Shut up." El mumbled, and Mike chuckled as she slid her piece onto the board. "Nice save – Wheeler."

"Oh, Wheeler? You're pulling out the last names?" Mike asked, raising his eyebrows at her.

"Mine's Hopper." El said, resting her chin in her hand. "If you needed to know."



“Good to know,” Mike said, the corner of his mouth quirking up, “Hop.”

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“Go to jail. Again.” Max said, tapping the board with her nail and glaring at Dustin. “Are you just really bad at rolling the dice or something?”

“No!” Dustin whined, frowning and slamming his piece down on the jail tile. Coincidentally, El’s piece was in the visiting space of the tile. She smirked at him, and Dustin rolled his eyes.

“Mike, are you going to buy the Boardwalk?” Lucas scoffed, watching as Mike counted his dollars. “You know that’s a rookie move –”

“Go big or go home, Lucas.” Mike said, slipping the bills over to El, the banker, and letting his hand linger against hers for a moment before pulling away. “You’ll be the one crying when you have to pay rent.”

“El, how close are you to being bankrupt?” Max asked, staring down at her pile of bills (she hadn’t organized them, because she liked to hear Dustin complain when El wanted to buy something and had to shuffle through a pile of money to pay for it) – mostly tens and fifties.

“None of your *business*, Max.” El said, pursing her lips and turning to Mike, handing him the Boardwalk card.

“Have you ever been to an *actual* boardwalk?” Mike asked, slipping the card with the rest of the properties.

“You mean – near the ocean?” El asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Yeah.”

“Nah. It’s kind of far –”

“I’m from *California*.” Max smiled, resting her chin on her hand.

“And you’ll take every opportunity to say it, won’t you?” El asked, trying to hide her annoyance behind a coy smile.

“Lucas and I have been thinking about taking a trip over the winter break. ‘Cause it’ll still be warm in southern California –”

“Am I getting an invitation?” El asked, turning to look at him. “I don’t know if you remember this, but we just met today.”

“If you’re Dustin’s friend, then you’re ours.” Mike said, slipping his hands into his laps to rub against his knees.

“I’d hope we wouldn’t just be friends –” El said with a frown, tilting her head at him.

“What do you suggest?” He asked, sitting up a bit straighter and biting back a grin.

“*Best* friends!” She teased, leaning a shoulder against his. Mike glanced away and moved his head to hide the blush rising on his cheeks, but soon they were both turning the color of Max’s hair.

“Hopper!” Max shouted, waving a hand in front of her, “Hel-lo! You going to keep flirting with Wheeler over there, or actually play the game?”

“Maybe we should take a break.” Dustin said, eying his piece still stuck in jail. “And finish the rest of the pizza.”

“Man, I’m still stuffed.” Lucas said, patting his stomach. “Might head outside for a smoke, though.”

“Could I bum one off of you?” Max asked, turning toward him. “I’ll pay you back.”

“Sure.” Lucas shrugged, standing up from his chair and holding a hand out to her.

“El?” Dustin sighed, opening the pizza box and pulling out a slice. “You and Mike want to go on a walk?”

“Huh?” El furrowed her brow and glanced up to see Max putting on her hoodie. “Oh. Are they --?”

“Just going for a smoke. But if you two leave, I can fix up the

apartment some more.” Dustin said, smiling with his lips pressed together in a thin line. “You know. It’s still a little dirty.”

“That sounds great.” Mike said, turning toward El and standing up. “Can we --?”

“Yeah! Of course.” El nodded, standing up. She ruffled Dustin’s hair as she walked past, opening the front door to let Mike out first. She turned around – “Dustin?”

“Yeah, El?” Dustin asked, glancing over at her.

“Thank you.”

“Duh. You owe me one.”

“Chinese take-out tomorrow, on me.”

“Love you, El.”

“Right back at you, Dusty.”

El shut the door and leaned against it for a moment before turning to that tall Wheeler boy. He walked with his hands shoved in his pockets, his lip between his teeth.

They’d made it halfway down the elevator before he finally said something –

“Do you believe in – fate?” He asked, quietly, and it made El go red again.

She looked over at him; his loosely tied converse, dark jeans, worn-out t-shirt and hoodie. The long hair and the jawline and the way he seemed to look at her, like he was already knowing her and seeing her and she hadn’t even opened that door for him yet –

“Yeah.” El said, nodding. “I do.”

“Do you –” Mike frowned, reconsidered (*please say it*, El thought, biting down hard on the inside of her cheek, *please*), “I think I know you. I feel like I’ve met you before. I feel like I’m supposed to meet

you, at least, and it's like – it's almost like –”

“Destiny.” El said, nodding her head. “*Destiny*.”

Mike turned to stare at her and took a step forward. El slid her palm against his cheek and pulled him down and their lips collided.

It was like reading your favorite book for the seventeenth time or listening to your favorite record in celebration; it was like taking a bath after a long day at work and feeling the stress fall off of you; it was like jumping into a swimming pool on a hot summer day; it was like seeing the ocean for the first time; it was like someone buying you a drink at a bar; it was like having a sleepover with your best friends when you're younger and staying up all night and thinking that it can't get better than that; but everything gets better, over and over, again and again, and suddenly, El thinks, she knows that she and this Wheeler boy are going to be tangled together forever.

Because of *fate*. *Destiny*. Whichever word you wanted to use (whether or not they were interchangeable, she'd have to ask Dustin later) – and the elevator doors dinged open.

“*Woah*, there!” Max laughed, smirking at El as she gasped and pulled away from Mike, pressing into his chest. “Wow. So I guess Lucas won that bet. I gave you the benefit of the doubt and said later tonight –”

“Give ‘em a break, Maxine.” Lucas said, following her inside the elevator and slinging an arm around her shoulders. Max leaned her head against them. “They’re just kids.”

“So are *you*, Lucas.” Mike said, slightly exasperated – then, to El, “Let’s go on a walk.”

“Don’t be out too late, kiddos!” Max called out as El and Mike (fingers intertwined, practically staring at each other the entire time they crossed the lobby), “Call if you’re not coming home!”

“Max!” El squeaked, the door of the apartment building opening. “Sorry about her.”

“Don’t be.” Mike smiled, wrapping an arm around her. “Let’s get some coffee.”

“And talk some more. Right?” El asked, looking up at him.

“Yeah. I kind of want to get to know the real El Hopper –”

“It’s – Jane. Technically. El’s my middle name. But I like El better.” El said.

“I like El better, too.” Mike said, “El Hopper and Mike Wheeler.”

“I like the sound of that.” El replied with a grin. “I really, really do.”

## 2. indiana state

### Summary for the Chapter:

a group project and a halloween party

OR

a mileven college au

“I didn’t think they made college students do group projects.” Max said, pushing the door open with her hip and holding it in her empty hand. El stepped through and burrowed her face into the collar of her jacket, pushing her hands into her pockets. “If I’d known that, I probably wouldn’t have even enrolled.”

“It’s fine.” El sighed, but Max gave her a pointed look. “Okay, it sucks. But we’ll get through it, because at least we get to work together –”

“But we have to work with those two nerds that sit on the other side of the room.”

“Who cares?” El shrugged, rolling her eyes. “Max, *we’re* nerds –”

“Okay, but they are *nerd* nerds. I like video games and you really like books. But they wear video game characters on their shirts, and I bet they play *Dungeons and Dragons* for fucks’ sake.” Max giggled, chewing on her lip and setting her skateboard on the ground. She rolled slowly next to El (who had never succeeded at learning how to skate, despite the fact that Max had been relentless in middle school before giving up in their freshman year of high school when El got her learners’ permit instead), and shoved her hands into her pockets.

“What time are we meeting them again?” El asked, chewing on her lip.

“Uh – the short one said seven. The tall one said at the library. And then the short one said third floor, in the back, so –”

“Didn’t they say their names?” El asked, tilting her head at Max. “Or

are you just trying to be an asshole?"

"Will and Mike. And yeah, I am." Max grinned, planting a foot on the ground. "You headed to chem?"

"Yeah. I'll see you later, then?"

"Want me to bring you a snack when we meet up?" Max asked, tossing her long hair over her shoulder. "I bought a bunch of candy last night for the party this weekend."

"I'd love that. Thanks, Maxine."

"Hey!" Max laughed, flicking her off. "Fuck you, Jane."

El stuck out her tongue at Max as she rode away; she turned right, and headed to chemistry.

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El flicked through a copy of *White Noise* and pressed on in the chilly October air. She walked up the steps of the library and tucked the book under her arm, pausing to open the door for a giggling pair of girls.

"Thanks!" They shouted, throwing hands up into the air in a lazy wave. She lifted her own hand to wave and kept her lips pressed into a thin, tight smile.

Her first few months of university had been tough. Having Max was a blessing, because they'd practically been tied at the hip since sixth grade, but still.

Max was making friends left and right, and even hosting a Halloween party at their little apartment this weekend. El didn't have the heart to tell her that the whole thing was sending her anxiety through the roof.

A bunch of eighteen year olds crammed into their two-bedroom apartment with illegal bottles of vodka (stolen from her brother's stash back home) and a bunch of sugar to get hopped up on?

*Fuck.*

El ducked her head and headed up the stairs. She walked up two flights and paused at the landing, glancing into the big study room. Most of the tables were empty, but she saw two familiar faces across the room, sitting across from each other in a big booth.

Max wasn't there yet.

El took a deep breath and walked into the room, dodging tables and people before sliding in beside the taller of the two.

He turned to look at her, wide-eyed, like he hadn't been expecting her. "Are you – Jane?"

"El." El said, biting down hard on the inside of her cheek afterwards; she could feel a blush creeping up her cheeks. "I mean – like, officially Jane. But everyone calls me El."

"Nickname or middle name?" The shorter one asked, and El snapped her attention to him. Something about him made her anxiety drop down to manageable levels, and she decided to focus on him instead.

"Middle name. Jane El Hopper." She said, holding out a hand to him. "You're – uh – Mike?"

"Will." He said, sliding his hand into hers and shaking. "So – is Max coming?"

"Yeah, she'll be here soon." El said, swallowing the thick lump in her throat and turning to – "Mike, right?"

"Yeah." He said, and she held out a hand to him. His palm slid against hers and she felt something click.

They didn't shake hands, but sat there holding each other's palms for far too long. He finally pulled his own hand away, cheeks turning red as he reached up to push his hair out of his face.



“Have we met before?” He asked, and El stared at him for a moment longer before shaking her head.

“No. There’s no way –”

“What’s up, losers?” Max asked, sliding in to sit next to Will. “Will and Matt, right?”

“Mike.” El corrected her, and Max flicked her eyebrows upward.

“Sorry. Mike.” Max said, offering the two boys a short grin. “So – concepts in college algebra. Which one of you two is good at math?”

“Me.” Mike said, raising a hand. “Will’s good at art.”

“Oh. Are you majoring in that?” Max asked, leaning her chin against her hand. “Like – drawing?”

“Yeah. Drawing and Studio Design.”

“Oh, double major!” Max smiled, knocking her fist against the table. “Harder worker than me, huh?”

“Well, I didn’t mean it like –”

“I’m kidding.” Max said, staring at him. “Shit, are you two going to be sensitive? Because –”

“She fucks around a lot.” El said, and Max glared at her. “I mean – wait, what? What, why are you glaring at me?” El asked, pressing a hand to her chest.

Will was biting down hard on his lip to hold in a snort. Mike couldn’t hide his chuckles, and Max tilted her head back against the booth.

“I don’t fuck around a lot. I joke a lot.” Max said, and El relaxed in her seat.

Right, innuendos. She’d always been a bit too oblivious to those.

“Sorry –” El started, a lengthy apology sitting at the tip of her tongue, but Mike bumped his elbow against hers and shook his head.

“Don’t be. That was funny.” Mike assured her, tugging a notebook out of his backpack and setting it on the table. “Oh, you’re reading *White Noise*?”

El was too busy staring at him to hear his question. Max kicked her shin under the table, hard, and El snapped back to reality. “Uh – what?” She sputtered, before seeing that Mike was looking at the novel in her lap. “Oh! Yeah. For a class.”

“Oh, really? What’s your major?” He asked her, “I’m double majoring in English and Engineering.”

“Nerd.” Max coughed, and Will giggled as he pulled a folder out of his backpack.

“Social work. It’s just for like – some English elective I’m taking.” El said, and Mike sat up slightly.

“ENC3014? I think we might have that together. ‘Cause I feel like I’ve seen you before –”

“No, it’s ENC3659 –”

“Guys.” Max sighed, pressing her palms to the table. “As much as I am living for your nerdspeak right now, can you flirt later? We’ve got a project to do.”

“Oh. I’m not –” El started, but Mike was already blushing and turning his head to look down at the project rubric.

“Do you guys want to come to our Halloween party this weekend?” Max asked, her eyes not leaving El’s face. El could feel herself deflate; whatever confidence she’d slowly built up during the conversation was immediately gone at the mention of that stupid fucking party.

Will perked up and nodded, looking toward Mike. “That sounds awesome. We don’t have any other plans –”

“So it’s a yes.” Max said, before Mike could open his mouth to say anything. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way – read us that rubric, Mikey.”

“Just Mike –”

Max snapped her fingers. Mike started to read.

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“I was really just trying to help you out. You’re kind of bad at making friends.” Max said, taping up a black streamer above the door, intertwined with an orange one.

“I’m not.” El said, holding the chair steady. “I just get nervous. In middle school and high school –”

“Everyone made fun of us. They teased us constantly, but I don’t shit the bed every time someone tries to talk to me.” Max said, jumping off the chair and crossing her arms. “That look okay?”

“It looks fine.” El sighed, pushing the chair back to the dining table. “Max, I really don’t feel good. Can I just go somewhere else tonight? You won’t even know I’m gone –”

“El.” Max said, turning toward her and pressing her hands to her shoulders. “My beautiful El. Your costume is so cute –” El was dressed to look like Lucy van Pelt from the Peanuts comics, something she’d come to regret in the past hour. She thought she looked fucking ridiculous, and was sure that half the people that showed up (at minimum) would look at her with a confused face or annoyed glare or –

Max was dressed as Jessica Rabbit. How she had come across a red floor-length dress and why she wanted to wear it, after eighteen years of never putting on a skirt ever was beyond her.

But El looked like a dork, and Max looked hot. So that was that.

“I look fucking stupid.” El muttered, and Max frowned and pulled her forward in a hug. “I look so dumb.”

“Take a shot.” Max said, nodding over to the alcohol. “Come on. Come on, come on, let’s get a shot in you.”

“Max, I don’t even feel like – drinking or – or doing anything. I just feel so –”

“You’re just anxious because it’s your first Halloween not in Hawkins and that’s scary. And I’m scared too. I’m in a fucking dress!” Max yelled, motioning to her outfit. “I look so stupid! But part of Halloween is looking stupid and doing weird shit and that’s what we’re doing. We’re throwing a party and we’re having fun.”

Max poured them each a shot of vodka, and raised her glass.

El raised her glass weakly, and reached for an apple. Her chaser.

“Okay. On the count of three –” Max said.

“One –”

“Two –“

“Fuck it.” El said, downing her shot. She took a bite out of her apple and Max coughed, dropping her own shot glass in the sink. She took the apple from El and took a bite, winking at her. “Let’s just get this shit over with.”

“Alright!” Max grinned, reaching over to press the play button on the stereo.

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“You know what I think is fucking stupid?” El whispered in Mike’s ear, tugging him closer by the edge of his red hoodie. He’d come dressed as Elliott from E.T., probably the easiest costume in the world. She was four shots in, on the brink of passing out from sheer exhaustion, and somewhere in the crowded apartment, she could hear Max and some guy Lucas screaming the lyrics to *I Wanna Dance With Somebody*.

“What’s that?” Mike asked, placing a hand on the counter behind her hip. He’d taken two shots about an hour ago, and she figured he must be sober by now. Unless he was stupidly lightweight.

“I don’t even like parties.” El whispered, and Mike laughed against her shoulder, shifting on his feet to move closer to her. She traced the edge of his hoodie with her finger and looked up at him.

“I don’t either. But this one’s okay.”

“Why’s that?” El asked, biting down on her lip. Say me, she thought, practically begging the universe for it. Please say because of me.

“Music’s good.” He said, and El deflated slightly. “And you’re here.”

El stood up a bit straighter, leaning against the counter. If she looked anywhere besides his face, the room started to spin and she couldn’t see clearly. She used her other hand to grab onto his arm.

“Do you ever feel like – like maybe, in like – another life, or something, you knew someone?” El asked, the words coming out of her mouth slurred and stuttering. He tilted his head at her like he didn’t quite understand. El sighed.

“Like – like you’re meant to meet someone or be somewhere or – or talk to someone – or, like –”

“Like us?” Mike asked, and El nodded, her hand dropping from his arm down to his hand.

“Because we both hate parties and we like White Noise and you like reading but you’re good at math, and I’m so bad at numbers –” El sighed, and Mike laughed and pressed a hand against her waist to steady her as she started to pull him away from the counter, out of the kitchen. “Can we dance?”

“Uh – I don’t know how.” Mike giggled, reaching for a beer can on their way out. He ended up leaving it at the kitchen table when El decided to try and hold both of his hands, because holding her hands was far more important than a sip of disgusting, watery beer.

Will was wedged on the couch with a mixed drink between some girl

El recognized and a guy he did not, and the guy was smoking something and El thought absently of the fire detector in the kitchen. She turned toward Mike and pressed her hand against his cheek, letting it fall down to his shoulder.

*Thriller* started to play, and El slung her arms around Mike's shoulders. His hands hesitated for a moment before pressing against her waist.

"Just like this." El said, and suddenly they're middle-school-slow-dancing in the middle of her living room, surrounded by people.

And then it gets hazy.

El doesn't drink a lot, but when she does, she goes hard. And tonight was one of those nights, and she hadn't been particularly expecting to spend her entire Halloween chatting up Mike Wheeler in her kitchen and dancing with him in her living room, and she hadn't expected to spend any of it with Mike Wheeler in her tiny bedroom.

"I just have a twin bed." El said, leaning against her bedroom door and fumbling with the lock. "But we can make it work."

"Woah, woah, woah." Mike said, reaching a hand out to press against her shoulder and turn her towards him. "We aren't – doing that."

"Why not?" El asked, but she knows a hundred perfectly good answers to her own question. She has never done anything like that. She's so drunk she can barely make out the shape of him in her bedroom. They haven't even kissed yet –

"I wouldn't do that with you when you're like this." Mike said, sighing and moving his hand to cup her cheek. "El, you're like – ridiculously sweet."

"I know." She smiled, and Mike laughed.

He traced his finger against her cheek, and then on her jaw. He stared at her for a good minute, and she can feel his eyes on her skin and she's melting just a little, but she can't tell if it's the alcohol making her feel so hot or if she needs more of him on her. Now.

She opts for the second one, and she reaches for his jacket when he asks – “Can I kiss you?”

“Please.” She whispered, and he leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers.

Okay, El thought, leaning against him and pushing his hood away from his hair to run her fingers through it, we’ve got to be soulmates.

That’s the only way to explain why their lips fit together like fucking puzzle pieces, why nothing has ever felt so damn right in her entire life. Why her whole body is burning up, why her stomach is flipping, why –

*Motherfucker!*

El pulled away and gasped, running over and shoving the bathroom door open with her shoulder. She collapsed in front of the toilet and heaved.

“Damn it!” She yelled into the toilet, and Mike is right behind her, holding her hair back and pressing down on the handle. “God!”

“It’s okay.” Mike said, sitting down next to her and reaching up onto her bathroom counter to grab a hair tie. He pulled her hair away from her face and tied it up, reaching for toilet paper next. “You just had a little too much to drink. Or the kiss was really bad.”

“It wasn’t.” El sighed, leaning her forehead against the cabinet, “It was –”

And she’s heaving and vomiting again.

“Don’t say anything. I get it.” Mike chuckled, reaching for the mouthwash this time. “You’re okay.”

“Thanks, Mike.”

“Yeah.” He said, filling the cap with mouthwash and handing it to her. “Don’t even mention it, El.”

---

And she doesn't mention it, for an entire week.

She spends her minutes in class thinking about that kiss and the vomit and how he tucked her into bed and kissed her forehead and left. She thinks about how she woke up alone and how Max made pancakes in the morning for Lucas and some guy named Dustin and this girl named Sarah that apparently Dustin was dating but it's not like she even fucking cared because she didn't know either of them and neither of them were Mike so what-the-fuck-ever.

She's laying in her bed with her Walkman turned up on full blast, listening to Thriller on repeat and letting tears roll down her cheeks (melodramatic, but that's just how El happened to be sometimes) when Max swung the door open and leaned against the doorframe.

"Please." El muttered, lifting a hand. "Leave me."

Max said something, but El couldn't hear her over the sound of Michael Jackson. Max stormed over and yanked the headphones off her head, asking again – "What has gotten into you?"

"I'm going to be alone forever." El whispered, staring up at the ceiling. "Because I had too many shots and I threw up –"

"What happened?" Max asked, climbing onto her bed and laying next to her. El ended up being squished up next to the wall, but she had one searing thought in her head: at least she wasn't alone in her bed.

She almost burst into tears, but bit them back in favor of whispering: "I kissed Michael Wheeler."

"O-kay." Max said, turning to look at her. "So --?"

"We haven't talked since."

"He hasn't called you back?"

"I – didn't call him." El said, and she could feel Max roll her eyes



without even looking at her. “I know.”

“If you know, I don’t have to say it, right?” Max asked, but El could feel it coming from a mile away – “You are an idiot.”

“He probably hates me.”

“El, he probably thinks you hate him!” Max laughed, rolling over onto her side. El turned her head to look at Max.

“You should call him.”

“I don’t have his number.”

“Yeah, you do. For the project, remember?”

El paused.

They’d presented the project earlier this week. It had been weird.

They each had individual speaking parts, and Mike hadn’t even so much as looked at her.

“He thinks I’m stupid and gross.”

“He kissed you. He’s probably just embarrassed –”

“Of me?”

“Of *himself*. I don’t know. Call him.” Max sighed, sitting up. “I like Will. He’s fun at parties. He did this really hilarious strip tease for this other guy –”

“I’ll just talk to him in class.” El lied, watching Max walk toward her door. She saw Max’s eyes start to narrow into a glare, and El quickly added -- “The party wasn’t that bad, you know.” El said, and Max laughed.

“Yeah, I know. It was a fucking rager.” Max grinned, “And I’m throwing another one for your birthday next week.”

“Don’t you dare.” El said, sitting up and staring at her. “Maxine, are you serious?”

Max shrugged and reached for the door knob. "Nineteen is an important year."

"It's not."

"I know. But I'll use any excuse I can get to party!" Max shouted, tugging the door shut.

El flopped back down on her bed and slid her headphones over her ears. She skipped *Thriller* and shut her eyes.

---

El crossed her ankles and perched them up on top of the coffee table, sliding further down on the couch and flicking to the next page of her book. The bells rang above the door of the small cafe, and El didn't bother to look up.

She did look up, however, when someone sat down next to her.

She glanced up to see Mike in the same red hoodie he'd worn on Halloween, his cheeks flushed red (winter air or from seeing her?), clutching a physics textbook.

"Hey." He said, and El sat up on the couch and shut her book.

"Hi." She managed, and Mike licked his lips and glanced down at her empty coffee cup.

"Let me buy you a coffee."

"I already had one."

Mike paused, and El smiled slightly as he glanced up at the menu.

"Uh – a scone?"

"Sure. Cinnamon."

“Gotcha.”

He stood up and dropped his textbook on the couch next to her, and walked up to the counter. He came back with a latte and two scones, set together on a small white plate. He sat down next to her again, closer this time, their thighs pressed to each other. He rubbed his palms against his jeans and glanced over at her book.

“*White Noise* still good?”

“Oh, yeah. Almost done with it.”

“That’s nice.” Mike said, reaching for his coffee. He took a small sip and El reached for her scone. It crumbled. Mike quickly turned the plate around. “Take the other one.”

“It’s fine.”

“El,” he said, his lips quirking up into a small smile, “let me be nice to you.”

El giggled and took the other scone, pulling her legs off the coffee table and resting her elbow against her knee. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Mike asked, turning toward her. “You don’t –”

“Throwing up. Trying to get you in my bed. All of that –”

“Don’t be sorry about that. You were drunk, and there’s nothing really wrong with being drunk –”

“You were barely even tipsy –”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you.” Mike said, and El set her scone back down on the plate. “You were drunk. I know better than to kiss drunk girls and I’m sorry.”

El rubbed the crumbs from her fingers and pursed her lips. “Is that why you haven’t talked to me?” She asked, and he nodded and hung his head.

“It was a mistake. It was taking advantage of you and the situation

and I'm sorry." He said, and El shook her head.

"Don't be. I really, really liked it."

"You threw up."

"That was the alcohol, you idiot. You didn't repulse me so horribly that I vomited!" El laughed, and Mike smiled as she fell back against the couch, tucking her legs underneath her. "I really liked you."

"Liked?" Mike asked, and turned toward her. "As in – past tense?"

"Like." El said, blushing. "I like you."

"I'd like to take you on – a date. An actual date, where we go and do things that aren't getting drunk and dancing badly to *Thriller*."

"That was fun!" El laughed, shoving him in his arm. "Don't tell me that wasn't fun."

"Okay, you're right." Mike shrugged, setting his coffee down on the table. "I had fun with you."

"I had fun with you, too." El said, biting down on her lip. "This could be it."

"What?" Mike asked, flicking his eyebrows upward, "This? Our first – date?"

"Yeah." El said, nodding. "You bought me a scone, so..."

"Oh, right." Mike nodded, furrowing his brow. "That makes it a date."

"It's good enough for me." El said, reaching over to push his hair out of his face.

He reached up and caught her hand, leaning forward to press a kiss against her lips. Their fingers tangled together and El sighed, leaning against him.

Someone near them coughed, and they broke apart. El covered her

mouth with her hand and Mike turned red, standing and chugging the rest of his latte and shoving the rest of his scone in his mouth. "C'mon." He said, holding a hand out to her. "Let me buy you a real meal."

"I won't say no to free food." El said, standing. Mike rolled his eyes and El giggled again, grabbing her backpack and slinging it over her shoulder.

Their hands slid and fit into each other again. *Puzzle pieces.*

Mike set their dishes in a bin on the way out, and held the door open for her. He joined her side again in the brisk November air; and together, they went on.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

send me au's @timetravl on tumblr ohgdoihgodihgd  
byeeeeeee

i rewrote this like three times trying to make it work  
welp thanks for reading though!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!1

### 3. step by step

#### Summary for the Chapter:

step by step / oh, baby / really want you in my world

OR

mike and el can see into each other's apartments across the alleyway, and they both drink lots of morning coffee

#### Notes for the Chapter:

THIS IS SO LONG. I just kept writing and writing and I couldn't stop and I don't know why!!! I ended up capping it off right before it got to 20 pages in microsoft word because I just /had/ to end it. Overall, this is definitely one of my favorite fics i've written. more notes at the end!

El slapped her hand against her alarm clock. When that didn't work, she shoved it over onto the floor, rolled over in bed, and slapped a pillow over her head.

That didn't quite work, either.

She sat up in her bed and reached over, picking up the screaming clock and glaring at it.

3:00 A.M.

El yanked the cord out of the wall and stood up, tossing the hunk of plastic onto her bed as she stretched.

She walked to her bathroom and turned on the hot water, leaning over the sink to check her eyes. Mildly puffy, slightly bloodshot. Signs of pure exhaustion and tiredness – but nothing a cup of coffee couldn't fix.

She slipped into the hot shower and in minutes she was out again, wrapped up in a towel as she dug through her closet for a clean work uniform.

Two bins of laundry later, she found one that didn't smell – *too* bad.

She slipped it on and turned to adjust her nametag in the mirror.

*Elle.*

They'd gotten her name wrong. She should have said something, but now she was three months in and she felt it was stupid to ask for a new name tag at this point. So now she had to go with Elle versus El, and that was annoying because for some reason *Elle* always drew more "Oh, what's it short for?" conversations than El had – and those were conversations she hated to have.

Smiling and telling them it was her middle name was grating to her ears. She wished people would stop trying to talk to her and just – move along.

She was in a weird place.

El pushed the curtain dividing her living room into a separate bedroom, and walked over to her small kitchen. The studio apartment was *hardly* within her budget, but her dad helped pad just a bit of the rent each month so she could finally live in the city.

She was searching for degree-related jobs. It wasn't working out too well.

El opened the coffee maker and pressed down a filter, then filled it with grounds. She filled the small pot up with water and poured it into the machine, slapped the lid down and set the glass pot underneath the spout. She pressed the *on* button and then danced over to her freezer. It was an Eggo kind of day.

She hummed some Talking Heads song to herself as she popped two of the frozen waffles into the toaster, and filled up her lunch box with sandwiches and little bags of chips. An apple, a banana.

El leaned against her sink, arms crossed as she watched the coffee

slowly drip into the pot. She reached over the sink and unlatched the window, pushing it up to let in some of that sweet – well, dirty, but she still kind of liked the smell – spring city air.

The window across the alley was open, and she watched a guy with big hair and plaid-printed pajama pants struggle to set up his own coffee pot. He was reading instructions (really? Who didn't know how to use a coffee pot?) and he fumbled with the coffee filters. They stuck to his fingers in a way she'd never seen coffee filters *stick* to someone's fingers, and his tin of coffee grounds went tumbling from his counter to his floor as he struggled to get them off.

“NO!” He shouted, and El snickered quietly to herself as she poured herself a mug of coffee for now, and put the rest into her travel mug for later.

Cream and sugar added, and she tucked the lunch box and travel mug into her backpack. She sipped on her mug of coffee and ate her Eggos plain (she was running late at this point), and she shut the window and flicked off the lights before ducking out the door.

---

*I don't even like coffee*, Mike thought, chewing on the inside of his cheek as he swept coffee grounds into a dust pan, *why am I even bothering trying?*

He knew why.

He was in his first semester of graduate school, and the classes were tougher than he'd expected. Fifty-page essays every week were leading him to fall behind on his thesis, so he did the calculations and realized that if he cuts out three hours of sleep every night and substitutes the sleep with coffee, he should be able to catch up and be on track by April.

Maybe.

Mike dumped the grounds into the trashcan and went back to the coffee maker, inhaling and exhaling a few times to calm down.



It was just a stupid plastic machine. It shouldn't be *this hard* to figure out.

Mike peeled a filter slowly from the stack and pressed it into the machine. He filled it with grounds (slowly, so he wouldn't spill any), and then filled the back with water.

He shut the lid and pressed down until he heard a *click*!

He pressed the *on* button and listened as the machine started to brew the coffee.

"Yes!" He cheered, shoving the pot under the spout and leaning back, satisfied.

He turned around to see his window was open; he frowned, leaned over, and shut it.

Hopefully his neighbors hadn't heard him.

---

El came home at seven, exhausted from another fifteen-hour workday.

She could hate it more than she does. But she really does hate it.

She spends her days working, and half of her nights looking through newspaper ads for jobs in social work or libraries or – anything. Anything that pays more than her job pays now, and has actual *livable* hours.

Because most of her time spent talking to other people is getting orders from her boss on where she needs to put the forklift or talking to her dad, who worries about her all the way from good ol' Hawkins, Indiana.

Sometimes (like tonight), when she's sitting on her couch eating takeout leftovers and sifting through re-runs of all her favorite soap operas, lonely and flicking through ads she's already read, she misses it.

And then she takes one look outside at that alleyway and remember the city she sits in, and she doesn't. It's that easy – like a lightswitch.

El shifted on her couch and leaned her neck back against the armrest. She shifted again, uncomfortable, and then sat up. She took her dirty dishes over to the sink and glanced over at the clock on the wall – almost nine – and yawned.

Across the alleyway, she could see the guy from this morning dancing.

His window was open again.

She unlatched her own window, and the familiar lyrics of *Step by Step* drifted across the alleyway and into her own apartment. Holy shit, he was *blaring it*.

*Step one! We can have lots of fun*

*Step two! There's so much we can do*

*Step three! It's just you and me*

*Step four! I can give you more*

*Step five! Don't you know that the time is right.*

The New Kidz on the Block's *HUH!* noise was repeated by the guy, and then again when he hit his hip on the counter and doubled over, crying out in pain. El couldn't help but giggle, and she leaned forward against the windowsill and cupped her hands around her mouth.

"Hey!" She shouted, but the guy couldn't hear her. She paused, huffed, and tried again – "*Hey!*"

He was still doubled over in his kitchen. El sighed and shut her window, flicking the lock. She shut off the lights and left the kitchen, tugging the curtain back to reveal her makeshift bedroom.

---

Mike's thesis writing had gone to shit during the day.

He'd gotten distracted by the comics section of the newspaper, and then again by the coffee maker. If he added enough sugar to the coffee, it tasted *really* good. So good that he needed several cups of it (emphasis on the word *need*, because he *needed* it!) and then invited over his friend Dustin to help him out with his thesis.

Dustin and Mike had ended up screwing around and playing on his Intellivision for a few hours.

As per usual.

"I really don't know why you would invite me over if you *actually* wanted to get stuff done." Dustin said, shrugging and setting the controller down on the console, leaning his head back against the couch. He was sitting on the ground, a now-empty popcorn bowl balanced between his knees. "This is extremely counterproductive."

"I have this huge mental *block*." Mike said, pressing his palm to his forehead. "It's like I can't get anything done. I had three cups of coffee today –"

"Three? Is that why you're being all –" Dustin paused and started to shake, his hands moving everywhere.

"Like I'm having a – seizure?" Mike asked, and Dustin huffed.

"*Jittery*. I couldn't come up with the word for a second –"

"I mean, yeah, I guess. This is really my first time having caffeine since high school. I'm surprised I'm not *more* hyper."

"Maybe you will be later." Dustin shrugged. He glanced down at his watch and stood up, tossing the bowl onto the couch. "Shit. I'm going to be late for my shift."

"Hosting tonight?" Mike asked, raising his eyebrows. "Want to bring by some fries later?"

"Yes and *no*. I bring you fries like every other day. Besides, Max will have my ass on a *plate* if I keep taking more free food –"

“Okay. Fine.” Mike waved a hand, sighing. “See you in class tomorrow?”

“Yep.” Dustin pointed at him, heading for the door. “Work on your thesis, Michael Wheeler.”

“Maybe.” Mike said, tucking an arm behind his head and leaning over to turn off the Intellivision.

The caffeine hit him like a bullet. It was almost a blur, how fast it happened. One second, Mike felt like he was dozing off – he was sitting at his desk, working on his thesis, shuffling through different books and essays and research papers and –

*He needed to dance.*

It was almost like Footloose – or Dirty Dancing? – he always got those two confused, which used to annoy the hell out of his sister – and he had this thought of *nobody puts Mike Wheeler in a corner!*

He popped *Step by Step* into his CD player and set it in the kitchen, opening his windows to let in some fresh air. And then he was dancing.

Mike didn’t know how to dance. This was obvious, from the way he mostly emulated ‘dancing’ by jumping around the room and yelling the lyrics at the top of his lungs. He sang into his mirror, his blank television screen, his reflection in the shiny white plastic exterior of his fridge.

He sang until he hit his hip onto the fucking counter – about three minutes into his first song – and then he tumbled to the ground.

“Oh my god.” Mike mumbled, clutching his hip and curling up on the ground. “Oh – *fuck.*”

He thought he heard someone calling out to him, but he dismissed it as probably just some kind of caffeine-related hallucination. He was halfway into falling asleep on the floor before he garnered the strength to crawl around to the couch and climb onto it.

New Kidz on the Block continued playing, and Mike had his first

caffeine crash.

He slept until three in the morning.

---

Wake up, shower, get dressed, make coffee.

El sipped from her mug and looked across the alleyway.

He was up again.

She set down her mug and opened her window, sliding it up and leaning her head out. She waved her hand, and he stumbled over to his coffee maker. He was fumbling with it again – had he still not figured it out?

He glanced up at her and then back down at the coffee machine, before looking up again and rushing to open his window.

“Good morning!” El shouted across the alley, grinning at him. “You fell! Last night. I – uh, saw it.”

Mike stared at her for a moment before blushing, smiling and turning to lift up the edge of his t-shirt. On his bony hip, she could see a dark bruise forming.

“Does it hurt?” El asked, and Mike shook his head.

“No, it’s okay. So – uh, you saw me dancing?”

“Yeah.” El smiled, shaking her head. “You sure got some – er, original moves.”

Mike laughed and shook his head, withdrawing back into his apartment to fuck around with his coffee maker. He threw the pack of filters down and leaned out the window again.

“I’m Mike!” He said.

“I’m El.” She replied, and leaned out the window to reach her arm

across the alley. He did the same to her, and they brushed fingers. "Good enough."

"What are you doing up?" He asked, and El huffed and turned around, glancing at the clock.

"Being late for work. I ought to go." She said, stepping back into her apartment. "See you 'round, Mike."

"Yeah. Have a good morning!" He said, and she shot him another smile before shutting the window and downing her coffee.

Window locked, lights off, out the door.

---

"Oh, so you finally met one of your neighbors?" Lucas asked, raising himself to sit on Mike's counter. Mike was organizing his thesis notes into a binder.

He'd gotten four pages done. His biggest victory in a *month*.

"Not really a neighbor -- well -- yeah, she lives across the alley. Window right across from mine." Mike said, using his shoulder to scratch his cheek as he flicked through a few papers. "Do you happen to be sitting on an article by Darwin Johnson?"

Lucas shifted on the counter and tugged a piece of paper out from under him. "Nope. Natalie Freeman."

"Shit." Mike huffed, looking around the kitchen.

"Is she cute?" Lucas asked, and Mike paused.

"Yeah." He said, after a beat. Lucas snickered.

"Did you embarrass yourself in front of her yet?"

It was a loaded question. They both knew that.

Mike blushed and Lucas burst into never ending laughter, clutching

at his sides. “You – met her – this – *morning!*” He yelled, practically falling off the counter. “What could you have –”

“I was dancing. I hit my hip –” Mike tugged up his t-shirt again. “Stop laughing! I am *injured*, Lucas.”

“It’s a bruise, Mike.” Lucas giggled, wiping a tear away from his eye. “Only you could embarrass yourself in front of a girl within five minutes of meeting her –”

“It was before, actually. She saw me dancing and stuff before we introduced ourselves to each other –”

“Oh, man. What do you think she thinks of you?” Lucas asked, and Mike leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling.

“I invited you over to help me organize this binder. Not talk about some girl who I don’t even know –”

“What’s her name?” Lucas asked.

Pause.

“El.” Mike said, thinking of her curly brown hair and her brown eyes and her warehouse worker suit. He couldn’t hide his slight smile.

“El Wheeler.” Lucas said, pursing his lips and nodding. “Has a nice ring to it.”

“Shut *up!*”

---

El shut the door to her apartment quietly. She dropped her things on her small kitchen table and walked straight to the bedroom. She slipped into a pair of pajama pants and an old paint-stained t-shirt from back home. She tied her hair up out of her face and collapsed onto her bed.

She’d nearly gotten fired today.

It wasn't her fault, not really, or at least that's what she'd been telling herself for the past few hours to make herself feel better. She kept knocking the end of her forklift tongs against things, and she knocked over a stack of wood pallettes. They were empty, basically useless, but her boss liked to recycle them so he could save money on shipping and storing costs. It made *sense*, but it seemed like such a menial thing to get upset about that El couldn't fathom why he felt the need to threaten her job over it.

She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, and inhaled. She wouldn't cry about it. She was over crying about this stupid warehouse job. It was just a filler until a job interview next week, which she would hopefully get – and if not, she'd start calling her few friends in this stupid city and ask them for help with their connections or whatever and –

El couldn't help it. She let out a snort, a shaky inhale, and then a full-fledged sob.

She rolled over and buried her face in her pillow and sobbed into it, because she was *lonely*. Back home in Hawkins she had Will, her step-brother, and her step-mom and her dad. She had the few other girls she knew; Heather, Janet, Delilah. She had her neighbors Johnny and Wendy and –

El curled herself around the pillow, crying into it.

She wanted to be home. Not apartment-home. But home, home.

She considered it, for half a second. Packing a bag and leaving tonight. She'd buy a bus ticket and be there by seven in the morning. She'd get fired for sure if she didn't show up tomorrow, but maybe it was time to give up. Maybe her degree had all been for nothing, maybe she was wasting her time, maybe she should just go back to stupid Hawkins, maybe –

El sat up and wiped her tears away.

She knew better than that. She was better than that. There was nothing wrong with staying in Hawkins – Will had decided to, and taken a job teaching middle school art classes – he was beyond



happy.

Hawkins was fine. But there was a reason she was in this city. She could feel it when she walked down the sidewalk and she could feel it when she walked in her apartment building, when she cracked open her window and breathed in that musky city air.

There was a reason she was here. There was a reason for everything.

El slipped off her bed and walked out from behind the curtain, into her living area. She walked over to the kitchen and opened the window, lifting it up.

Mike turned from where he was stirring something on the stove, and filled a cup with water. El crinkled her nose at him.

“You drink tap water?” She called out, and he dropped his cup in the sink. The water rebounded and splashed up onto his t-shirt, and he squeaked and jumped away from the sink. “Sorry!”

Mike looked up at her and smiled, waving a hand. “That’s okay. I – uh.” He moved the pot on the stove and stepped away, out of sight.

He came back a moment later in a new t-shirt.

“What are you making?” El asked, and Mike glanced down at the pan.

“Macaroni and cheese. Grad student diet.” He said, leaning over. “Hey – um.”

“Yeah?” El said, leaning forward.

“Have you had dinner yet?”

“Nope.” She said, shaking her head. “Why? You feeling up to sharing?”

“If you feel okay with coming over here. My place is kind of – uh – dirty. Messy. Not really, but kind of. I’ve been organizing all my thesis notes.” He said, rubbing a hand against the back of his neck.

“I mean, I guess you don’t seem super –” El shifted on her feet, paused, “Serial-killer-y.”

“I’m not.” Mike said, holding his hands up. “I promise.”

“Alright.” El said, biting down on her lower lip. “I’ll –”

“But if you come over, you have to promise not to murder me in my apartment.” Mike said, pointing a finger at her. “You don’t seem super serial-killer-y either. But – you never know.”

“You’re right. You never know.” El shrugged, and held up a hand. “I promise. Scout’s honor.”

“Alright. Get on over here. Three-fifty-three.” He said, shutting the window.

El shut her own window, locked it, and glanced down at her clothes. She thought about changing, but – nah. If he couldn’t take her in her pajamas, he wouldn’t want her any other way.

El grabbed her keys, slipped out the door, and locked it behind her.

She walked down two flights of stairs and pushed open the door. Twenty steps to the right and she was walking into his apartment building and up the stairs.

Two flights of stairs and down a long hallway, where apartment 353’s door was already propped open by a binder. El picked it up and shoved the door open with her hip, and there he was: Mike.

“Hey.” She said, and he turned around with a slight jump.

“You’re fast.” He said, and El shut the door and locked it behind her, setting the binder on the side table next to the couch as she walked past. “Ready to eat?”

“You bet.” She said, leaning against the counter and looking across the street at her own empty apartment. “I live right there. That’s a little weird.”

“What?” He asked, turning toward her. He was taller than she’d

expected, and she had to look up at him.

“You can see almost my whole apartment. You can just – watch me.”

“But I’ve never done that.” He pointed out, then jumping to, “But you have.”

“Huh?”

“Last night.”

“I tried *saying* something to you.” El replied, and Mike raised his eyebrows. “But you were too busy crying on your kitchen floor.”

“I wasn’t crying!” He replied, shaking his head. “Me? Cry? Nope. No.”

El laughed and watched Mike open the cabinet near the stove; practically empty, save for paper plates, plastic forks and spoons and a few reusable cups. One coffee mug.

“You said you’re a grad student?” El asked, and he nodded.

“Yeah, first year. Do you go to school?” He asked, pulling a paper plate out and dumping a spoonful of macaroni on it, and then handing it to her along with a fork.

“I just graduated. I’m trying to find a job related to my degree.”

“Which is?”

“Social work.”

He turned to face her, the corners of his mouth quirking up in a smile. “That’s sweet. You want to work with kids?”

“Oh, I’d love to.” She said, pausing to shove a spoonful of macaroni in her mouth. It wasn’t until after the first bite she realized she was *starving*. “I’d like to work with foster kids and adoption and stuff like that. But really I’m at the point where I’ll take anything I can get.”

“I completely understand.” He said, turning the stove off and carrying his own plate over to the couch, where he sat down and turned to

look at her. She took this as an invitation and followed him, sitting down beside him. “I took the semester off from working to focus on my thesis, but it’s turning out pretty shit.”

“I mean, you don’t have to have it done until your last year, right?”

“I’m doing an accelerated program.” He replied around a mouthful of macaroni. Where it should have been gross, El found it endearing (and still a little gross), and she bit back a laugh as he choked a bit.

“And what’s it in?”

“Urban planning and design concepts. It’s like engineering but for the government in terms of planning out new suburbs and stuff – it’s not nearly as boring as it sounds, I promise. I got my undergraduate degree in engineering, but I didn’t really want to go sit in an office, so I figured this would be more hands-on.”

“I get that.” El nodded, tapping her fork against her plate. “Hate offices.”

“Yeah. That’s the kind of job my dad has, and he’s pretty miserable.” Mike said, and turned to her. “You from around here?”

“Not really. Hawkins, Indiana.”

“Oh.” Mike frowned, and then said, “I haven’t heard of it.”

“No one has.” El laughed, leaning into his couch. His was much more comfortable than her own. She kicked her feet up onto the coffee table, and Mike mirrored her. “You?”

“Detroit.” He replied, but didn’t give any further explanation. “What do your parents do?”

“My dad’s a sheriff, and my mom kind of hops around from job to job.” El shrugged, and then added, “My step-brother just started teaching. He does art classes.”

“That sounds fun. I thought about being a teacher at one point.”

“And what stopped you?” El asked.

Mike glanced up at her. She rested her cheek against the back of the couch so she could face him, talk to him easier. He set his empty plate on the coffee table.

“I don’t know. My parents think it’s – stupid. But they’re stupid, so.” He mumbled. “My sister’s a journalist.”

“What’s her name? She live here?”

“Yeah, but I don’t see her much. She has weird hours.” Mike said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Nancy Wheeler.”

El sat up slightly and furrowed her brow. She’d seen that name somewhere, or maybe read it somewhere – and then – “Oh my god, she wrote that story about –”

“The foster home fire.”

“Wow!” El gasped, sitting up, “Oh, she’s such a good writer! That’s one of the stories that made me want to get into social work a couple years back.”

“Oh, really?” Mike asked, running a hand through his hair. “Cool.”

His new reservation made El’s stomach twist, and she felt her lips devolve into a frown. Maybe there was something about talking about his family that made him all of the sudden so – *off*, so El scrambled for a new conversation starter, but after her floundering all she could get was – “So – New Kidz on the Block?”

Mike laughed, and the air shifted back to something friendlier. He stood up and walked over to his stereo, and pressed the *on* button.

*Step by step, oh, baby, gonna get to you, girl*

*Step by step, oh, baby, really want you in my world*

He started to dance again, and El immediately fell into an insane laughter, clapping her hands over her mouth as he tried desperately to emulate some of the most ridiculous dance moves she was sure they’d both grown up with – hip thrusting, moon walking – he reached a hand out to her and pulled her up. She stepped over the

back of the couch and he grabbed her other hand, spinning her around.

“Mike!” El laughed, sliding across the kitchen floor.

Her hip hit the corner of the counter and she went tumbling down like a tower of cards, her hand flying to her hip as she collapsed on the tile. Mike slammed his hand over the power button and knelt down, his lips pressed into a thin line.

“Is this revenge?” El asked, pressing her forehead against the tile while she waited for the pain to wane. “Did you invite me over here to sabotage me?”

“*What?*” Mike laughed, reaching a hand toward her hip. “Yeah, totally. I invited you over just for the same thing to happen to you so I could laugh at you – let me see it.”

El rolled over onto her back and lifted the edge of her t-shirt up.

“Damn. Broke the skin.”

“Really?!” El cried out, bending down to look at it. He laughed when she realized that he was lying to her, and she curled her hand into a fist and hit him in the shoulder. “Shut up, will you?”

“Your face!” Mike laughed, reaching for her hands.

He meant to grab her hands to pull her up, but he was laughing too hard to summon the strength. El started giggling and then it was the two of them, laughing with their fingers intertwined on the floor of his tiny kitchen.

Mike stared down at her, this girl with her curly hair and her pajamas on, and he felt a string in his heart pull him toward her.

*Hold on*, he thought, his laughter fading away to a smile, *I don't know her*.

Saying he didn't know her felt like a lie.

Because he did know her, just a little bit, but not at all like he knew

his other friends. Would she call them friends, or was he jumping too fast toward something he wanted?

“Are you going to pull me up or just stare at me all day?” El asked, and Mike blushed and jumped to his feet, pulling her up. He hesitated a moment before pulling his hands away, and then moving toward the coffee table to grab their abandoned plates.

He turned around to see that El was moving toward the door, fixing her t-shirt and rubbing her hip. “I should go.” She said, nodding toward the door. “Work in the morning.”

“Right.” Mike said, nodding and turning away to hide his disappointment. “Well – you’re welcome anytime. And – uh –”

El walked over to his coffee table and flipped open the binder. She uncapped a pen and scribbled a few numbers onto the front page (his thesis cover sheet, but fuck it, he would just reprint it later), and then recapped the pen and dropped it.

“Call me.” She said, smiling at him and walking toward the door. “I work from three to seven. Four days a week.”

“When do you have off?”

“Day after tomorrow.” She said, unlocking the door and tugging it open. “Goodbye.”

“Wait! Uh – what’s your last name?” He asked, and El leaned against the doorway.

“Hopper.”

“Okay. Goodnight, El Hopper.”

“And goodnight, Mike Wheeler.” She said, lifting a hand to wave before shutting the door behind her. He heard her faint footsteps disappear down the hallway.

He walked over to his window and leaned out, turning to look down the alleyway; he watched her walk on the sidewalk through the small crack, and three minutes later she was back in her apartment, safe

and sound.

---

He woke up the next morning and glanced over at his clock.

Five in the morning. He'd missed her, for the first time in three days. He laid an arm over his eyes and sighed, rolling over in his bed and pressing his face into the pillow.

He fell back asleep and woke up again around nine, where he finally climbed out of bed and showered. His apartment was a wreck, so he set about vacuuming and cleaning his bathroom and making his bed. Laundry needed to be done, but that could wait another day or two until he had more quarters.

Which meant he had to leave his apartment and go buy something to get more quarters in change, and he *hated* having to spend his little graduate stipend.

Sometimes when he gave bills over to a cashier, he could feel his heart ache. But today, at least, he'd probably get to see Lucas. Maybe Max, who he hadn't visited in a while. Dustin would be out of town this week, visiting some girl named Delilah that he was dating in Indiana.

He hadn't been on a date in a while – and then he started to think about El, and he knew he had to get out of that apartment.

Mike got dressed and grabbed his wallet, downed a glass of water, brushed his teeth.

And then he was out the door.

His hair was getting stupid long, flopping over in his face and needing to be pushed back every few seconds, and he knew he needed a haircut. But Nancy had been giving him his haircuts for a few years now, and he was pretty sure she was out of town until next month, working on some story and visiting her boyfriend in New York.



He might have to start putting it in a *ponytail* soon, and Mike shook his head at the thought.

He ducked into a coffee shop and bought a black coffee, then strolled down a few blocks and walked up a few steps to an old house where Lucas rented a room. He knocked.

A guy peeked out one of the windows, and he heard a yell from inside: “*LUCAS!*”

And then running footsteps, and the door swung open.

“Oh!” Lucas said, staring at Mike for a second. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Mike said, raising his cup in greeting. “Uh – can I come in?”

Lucas stared at him blankly for a moment before turning around and glancing over at the stairs. “Um – sure.”

“Okay.” Mike said, pausing and shifting on his feet. “Is this a bad time?” He asked, and Lucas exhaled in a long sigh.

“Nope. It’s fine.” Lucas said, shaking his head and opening the door a bit wider. Mike stepped inside and Lucas shut the door and then turned to walk up the stairs.

Someone was playing music in the kitchen, and down the hall in one of the bedrooms, someone was talking on the phone. He followed Lucas up the creaking steps and down the hall to the last bedroom, where Lucas pushed the door open and – “Max?”

Max turned around from her spot on the bed, where she was shuffling through CD’s. Max’s eyes drifted from Mike to Lucas, and then back to Mike.

“I didn’t know you two knew each other.” Mike said, furrowing his brow. “How did you two --?”

“Dustin.” Lucas said, and Mike nodded his head.

“So – you’re – uh –”

“Not dating.” Max said, and Lucas swallowed loudly beside Mike. Max gave Lucas a sympathetic look and then – “Okay. We’re dating.”

“Are you guys being serious right now?” Mike asked, smiling slightly. “I feel like I’m on a prank show or something.”

“No, we’re – actually dating.” Lucas said. Mike glanced between the two of them.

“Max Mayfield and Lucas Sinclair. Dating. Like – a couple. That gets along and has fun together?” Mike asked, and Max frowned from her spot on the bed.

“What’s that supposed to mean? You think I’m not fun?”

“No, not that.” Mike said, waving a hand at her. “You’re just – not like Lucas.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Lucas asked, crossing his arms.

“*Nothing*.” Mike huffed, raising his coffee to take a sip. He ended up chugging the whole thing, ignoring the burning down his throat, and then tossing the coffee into Lucas’ trashcan. “I was just stopping by for a second. I didn’t mean to intrude on whatever’s going on here –”

“We’re just hanging out.” Max said, standing up. “You don’t have to make this weird.”

“It’s a little weird.” Mike said, leaning against the doorway. His head was spinning. “I just show up to Lucas’ house and all of the sudden you’re dating one of my best friends –”

“I know I’m not your *favorite* person –”

“Max, I don’t have a problem with you! I like being around you! I don’t know how many times I have to say that –”

“Then why are you being so weird, Mike?” Lucas asked, and Mike turned toward him. He threw his hands into the air; they landed on his head, and he used his thumbs to pull his hair away from his face.

“He’s just jealous because he doesn’t have a girlfriend.” Max

muttered bitterly, and Mike groaned and rolled his eyes, his arms dropping to his sides.

"That's not it at all -- and -- you know what?" Mike said, walking away from the door, "I'm done with you two right now."

"Max, that was too far." Lucas muttered to her, and Mike heard Max whisper something to Lucas. He walked down the steps and toward the front door, shaking his head.

"Sorry, Michael!" She heard Max shout, and he raised a middle finger up toward the stairs as he opened the front door and ducked outside.

He was being cynical, and he knew he was. He could admit that much. It wasn't that he didn't want his friends to be happy, because he did, but since when did all of their happiness start revolving around dating one another? Since when did all of his friends start hooking up with people and getting into relationships without telling him?

Why did he suddenly feel so left out?

He shoved his hands into his pockets and felt the quarters there, and he turned around and started to head home. He'd just do his stupid laundry today.

He didn't feel like doing anything else.

---

El stepped into her apartment at half past five, feeling refreshed and excited because they'd finally granted her one of her many requests to go home early. They were overstaffed today, thank god, and of all the people that asked to go home early, she'd gotten it.

She felt like a new person.

She walked into her apartment and heated up an oven pizza, ate half of it, and walked into her bedroom to get her laundry together so she could do it today rather than spend one of her few days off doing it. She would get her laundry done and then come back and watch a movie and maybe make a hot chocolate or eat some ice cream and she would go to sleep *late* and wake up *late*!

This job had made sleeping in one of her *favorite* things to do.

El slung the netted laundry bag over her shoulder after changing in to a pair of jeans and a big t-shirt. She slipped on her windbreaker, tugged on her tennis shoes -- and then she was off.

The laundromat was just across the street, so all she had to do was wait for the road to clear and walk about ten steps. She stepped inside and looked around the empty room. She walked to the third aisle of washers and turned.

Mike was sitting in front of a washing machine, his forehead leaned against it. El dropped her laundry bag and walked over to him, touching him with the toe of her tennis shoe.

He jumped and looked up at her; he'd been listening to his Walkman, the earbuds still in his ears. He fumbled with it and pressed the pause button, and pulled the earbuds out. "Hey."

"Hi. Doing laundry?" She asked, leaning down to glance inside.

"Nope. Flipping burgers."

"Ha-ha." She said, standing up straight and walking back to her own clothes. She opened one of the machines and shoved her clothes in, then tugged her coin purse out of the back pocket of her jeans.

A quarter short.

"Hey -- do you have an extra quarter?" She asked, turning to look at Mike. He was already listening to his Walkman again.

She set the machine up with detergent and leaned down to look under the machines. Sometimes, if you got lucky -- there.

She tugged a quarter out from under the machine and slipped it in. She shut the door and pressed *colors and whites*, and walked over to one of the plastic chairs and sat down in it.

Mike glanced over at her, and she glanced over at him. Their gazes caught and he stood up, walking over to sit next to her.

“How are you?” He asked, letting the earbuds drape over his shoulders. She crossed her legs and shoved her hands into the pockets of her jean jacket. “It’s only – six-thirty, you know.”

“Yeah, I got off early.” She said, tilting her head at him. “How would I not know that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you just up and left. Maybe you’d quit. Just asking.” He said, and she frowned at the way he’d said it.

“I was just joking.” She said, and frowned down at her knees.

They lapsed into a silence. Mike shifted and sighed.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Are you okay?” El asked, turning to look at him.

“I’m having – feelings.”

“For *me*?”

“What?” Mike turned to look at her, but the smirk on her face told him she was just messing around. He relaxed slightly. “No, just – uh. Do you mind if I --?”

“Rant?” El asked, and he nodded. “Go for it, Wheeler.”

“My friends Max and Lucas started dating, and I didn’t even know they knew each other. My friend Dustin went out of town to go visit his girlfriend in another state and now I’m – just – alone. I mean, not really. I can still hang out with Lucas and Max –”

“But they’re dating now.”

“*Yeah*, so it’s *weird*. And it’s weird because I haven’t – like – this is stupid. Why am I talking about this with you?”

“I’m a trustworthy person.” El said, motioning to her face. “Don’t I look trustworthy?”

“I guess.”

El glared at him and pursed her lips, leaning her head forward to get closer to him. Mike was staring at her lips, and then the slight dimples on her cheeks before he thought, *oh shit, I have to say something else.*

“Yeah.”

“That’s why you’re telling me.” El said, leaning back in her seat.

“I don’t usually open up to strangers.”

“I’m not a stranger.” El replied, and Mike smiled at her. “If you let any old stranger into your apartment, I’m a little worried about you.”

“We’re –”

“Friends.” El finished, though the word felt thick on her tongue, like it needed to be premised with another word. Why didn’t the word friend sound right?

Mike lifted a hand to his hair, and El moved her own hand to her own hair self-consciously. She twisted a curl around her finger and tucked it behind her ear.

“Do you want to come over later?” Mike asked her, and she raised her eyebrows at him.

“Do you genuinely mean that, or is this like – uh, one of those things where you’re really lonely and I’m sort of there to just fill in the blanks for you –”

“What? No. No.” He shook his head. “You’re cool. And I want to get to know you better.”

“I think I already know you pretty well.” She said, and he made a face. “What?”

“You don’t know me pretty well.”

“You don’t really like your dad, and you and your sister aren’t that close. You’re lonely. You want someone –”

"Stop it." Mike said, moving a hand to press over her mouth. "Don't *expose* me."

El giggled against his palm and shoved his hand away.

"You work too hard. You miss your dad. You're probably like, one of the only people in the world that talks about their step-mom favorably."

"She's sweet." El said, and Mike grinned.

"You're sweet." He blurted out, and El blushed and rolled her eyes at him.

"Mike Wheeler –"

"El Wheeler –"

"Ex-cuse me?" El laughed, and Mike stared at her for a moment before realizing his mistake. He sank down in the plastic seat and looked away from her. "Did I just hear you correctly?"

"Sorry. That was like – such a mouth fart –"

"Ew. Mike, a mouth fart?"

"A word fart? I don't know! Sorry!" He said, but El was already laughing about it. She seemed to laugh all of his embarrassing moments off. He relaxed again, and reached over to let his hand rest on her arm. "Thanks."

"What for?" She said, giggling and leaning toward him. "Laughing at all your mouth farts?"

"For making me feel a bit better." Mike said. El smiled, and Mike smiled back at her.

It was like the world had come to a standstill, and the only two people moving were them – toward each other, leaning in slowly.

Something about it felt like *déjà vu*, like he'd been here a million times before, staring at this girl with the prettiest brown eyes and a

lightning strike smile.

His heart shifted in his chest, and her eyes closed as she leaned in – and – *ding*.

His clothes were done. Her eyes opened and he was standing, walking over to get them out of the wash. He shoved them into the dryer above the washer, his cheeks burning red. He didn't want to turn to look at her, to see if she was disappointed or something. Maybe she was. Maybe she wasn't. Maybe she realized that almost-kissing Mike Wheeler was the stupidest mistake in the world, because he was kind of stupid. Just some stupid grad student failing to write his thesis on time and having a crush on the girl that lived across that alleyway from him; Mike turned and El was standing next to him, and he didn't think about it.

He slipped his hand up against her cheek and leaned down and kissed her. She buried her hand in the soft flannel of his shirt and sighed into his lips, and then her hands were around his shoulders and threading through his hair.

Her washing machine *dinged* – but this time, neither of them moved to get it.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

IF YOU MADE IT THROUGH THIS ONE, THANK YOUUUUU / leave me a comment if you really liked it, and if you have any au recommendations, you can send them to my tumblr [timetravl.tumblr.com](https://timetravl.tumblr.com) !!! thank you again!



## 4. sixteen

### Summary for the Chapter:

in a universe where your soulmate's initials appear on your wrist on your sixteenth birthday, el faces her fate

OR

yeah, that au

“Are you nervous?” El asked, rolling up a clean washcloth and dampening it slightly in the bathroom sink. Max was sitting on the toilet, her legs crossed and her arms resting on her knees.

Her hair was tied away from her face with a hair tie, and El had taken care in cleaning her wrist with rubbing alcohol. Max swallowed and El raised her eyebrows.

They both knew she was nervous. But surprisingly, Max decided to tell the truth.

“Of course. I’m – terrified.” Max whispered, staring down at the blank spot on her arm. “This is it. This is the day.”

Her sixteenth birthday. They didn’t know when it would happen, only that it hurt like a bitch and it only took a few seconds.

It hadn’t happened yet, which was weird; outside, the sun was setting. Max’s birthday was almost over. She’d spent the whole day with El versus with her family.

It’s what most people their age did now. It was more interesting that way.

“Do you think it’ll be someone you already know?” El asked, sitting on front of Max and handing her the washcloth. Max set it on her thigh and shrugged.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what’s better or worse, you know? If it’s

someone I know, then – I mean. I don't know." Max whispered. "Do you think I'll know when it's about to happen?"

"Yeah. It'll probably hurt a little at first, and then –"

"El?"

"Yeah?"

Max shoved the washcloth into her mouth, and El reached for her hand. Then the screaming started.

El couldn't watch. The whole process wasn't exactly gory, because there was almost never blood. It just looked – scary. Terrifying.

Max screamed, and El pressed her face against Max's leg and clung to her hand with both of her own. Max started to sob, and when El turned her head, it was over.

A white scar, two thin, neatly written letters.

L.S.

Max tugged the washcloth out of her mouth and El reached for the bandage, wrapping it tightly around Max's wrist. Max reached up to wipe the few tears from her cheeks, and finally let her gaze meet El's.

"Don't say it." Max said, shifting on the seat and standing on shaking legs. "Just don't say anything."

So El didn't.

---

"Max got hers?" Mike asked, leaning back against the couch. El's feet met his leg, and she poked him with her toes. He laughed and batted her feet away.

"Yeah." El said, reaching for the blanket strewn over the back of the couch.

“Are you going to tell me what it said?” Mike asked, and El shook her head and pulled the blanket down, covering her legs with it.

It was spring. Her own sixteenth birthday was fast approaching, and she wasn’t sure she was ready to find out.

Sophomore year was weird. So many people were in relationships sophomore year and would come back to school in the fall with a totally different significant other. Some people flaunted their soulmate scars like jewelry; other people, like Max (and El, whenever she got hers) hid them with long-sleeved shirts, jackets, bandages.

Mike rested an arm on her legs and drummed his fingers against her covered knee. El met his eyes again.

He’d gotten his months ago. He refused to show anyone.

“Are you going to tell me what yours says?” He asked, and El pursed her lips.

Mike was her friend. Her best friend, as much as Dustin and Lucas and Will, but something was different with him. It was different in the way he came over an hour before everyone else when they spent the weekends at her house, and the way he walked her home on late nights when they’d spent all day playing board games or watching movies at his house. It was different in the way he’d always gotten her special birthday presents, not generic books or t-shirts or anything like that.

El felt her heart sink a bit into her stomach at the thought of the initials on her wrist reading as anything other than M.W. But at the same time – the thought of those letters on her wrist petrified her.

“Maybe.” She said, and he held his pinkie out to her. “What’s that for?”

“Let’s promise to show each other ours once you gets yours.” Mike said, wiggling his pinkie. “So we can get through this together.”

El stared at his finger, the way he was bumping it against her own. She raised her hand and curled her pinkie around his.

“Okay,” she said, “deal.”

---

“Is there anyone at our school with the initials H.D.?” Dustin asked, glaring down at his wrist.

“Not anyone I can think of.” Will said, staring down at his own wrist; N.L. He’d gotten his just a week ago, and he’d gone through three years’ worth of Hawkins yearbooks to try and figure out who it was. He’d come to the conclusion that it was no one in Hawkins, which was both sad and *exciting* at the same time. It meant that he’d have to leave Hawkins to find his soulmate – or that his soulmate would eventually end up in Hawkins to find him. *Romantic*, he thought, leaning to rest his back against the coffee table.

Dustin was strewn across a chair in El’s living room, and Lucas was yet to arrive. Max was trying to ignore the scar talk by hiding in the kitchen with El as she made popcorn, but it could only be avoided for so long.

Especially since Lucas had gotten his yesterday.

“What if it’s him?” Max asked, and El rolled her eyes up to the ceiling for what felt like the hundredth time that day – and Max asked again, “What would I even *do*?”

“I don’t know. Hug him? Kiss him? What are you supposed to do when you find out who your soulmate is?” El asked, turning the pot over and dumping the popcorn into a large bowl. Mike slipped into the kitchen and grabbed a stray piece from the counter, popping it into his mouth.

“Needs salt.” He said, reaching around her for another piece.

“Working on it, Wheeler.” El huffed, swatting his hand away, “Can you grab the M&M’s from the pantry?”

Mike grabbed the box and tossed it to Max, who caught it and ripped it open, dumping the contents into the bowl.

"Mike!" Dustin yelled, and Mike left the kitchen. Max scowled at him as he walked away.

"What?" El asked, glancing over at Max.

"He was trying to spy on us and figure out who mine is." Max whispered, and El had to bite down on her lip to keep from laughing. She turned around and leaned against the counter, her hands going to Max's shoulders.

"You're *paranoid*!" El cried out, shaking Max. "You're being *insane*! There's so many people with those initials –"

"Not in Hawkins." Max said, and El shook her head.

"You want to move back to California as soon as we graduate, anyways. Who knows if your soulmate is here?"

"It can't be him." Max said, moving her hands to squeeze El's shoulders. "Tell me it won't be him."

"Why are you so scared of that? What's so wrong with Lucas?" El whispered, and Max moved her hand to clamp over El's mouth.

"Don't let them hear you!"

"I whispered!"

"We already tried dating! It didn't work out. We didn't even work *well* together –"

"That was middle school. Eighth grade. No one's eighth grade relationship works out!" El laughed, "Remember when I dated Jason Callahan? For like – what, four weeks? We were *thirteen*." El said, and Max pouted and turned away from her. "You're just scared because he's your friend."

"And now he's probably my soulmate. How do I even – *cope* with that?"

"You don't have to cope with anything, Max." El said, picking up the bowl of popcorn. "There's a reason this happens. Besides, not

everyone even *meets* their soulmate. Sometimes people just fall in love with someone else and disregard the whole thing. It's just – a recommendation!" El said, walking toward the living room. "Dustin, did you remember to bring the movie?"

"Oh, yeah." Dustin said, holding up *Evil Dead*. "Ready to scream your pants off?"

"Totally." El said, setting the bowl of popcorn on the coffee table and sitting down next to Mike. "Will, you okay with sitting down there?"

"I'll just squeeze in with Dustin if my back starts to hurt." Will said, tilting his head back to look at her, upside down. "Lucas and Max will sit up there, right?"

"If Lucas ever shows up." Dustin said, slipping off the chair and leaning from his spot on the floor over to the VCR. He slipped the VHS in and turned on the TV before crawling back up onto the chair.

"You look like Mews when you do that." Will snickered, and Dustin rolled his eyes at Will and gestured toward the popcorn.

"Want to hand me the popcorn?"

"Cats don't eat popcorn." Max said, and Dustin groaned and took his hat off, throwing it at her. Max caught it and leaned over to stick it on Will's head.

Max curled up next to El, who nudged the back of Will's head with her sock-covered foot. "Wanna press play?"

"Will do."

Will leaned forward and pressed the *play* button. The movie started, and El grabbed a blanket and tugged it over her legs. She curled up between Max and Mike, hogging the popcorn but passing it around whenever asked.

Mike's hand and hers met in the popcorn bowl, and he poked her with a butter-greasy finger. She threw an M&M at him, and he swatted it away with a snicker.

“Michael!” Dustin hissed, before jumping and screaming at a scary part in the movie. “Jesus!”

And then – a knock at the door.

“Max, go get it.” El whispered, waving a hand toward her. Max caught El’s wrist in her hand and El turned toward her.

Max’s eyes were wide, pleading: *don’t make me go alone.*

“Max.” El said, and Max immediately turned to the other boys. El reached her hand over and clamped it over Max’s mouth before Max could ask Will or Dustin to get the door instead.

El dropped her hand and wrapped it around Max’s bandage-covered wrist. She swiped her thumb over where the scar was, underneath the layer, and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“Go.”

Max stood and disappeared behind the couch. El turned back to watch the movie, and Mike turned toward her and tilted his head.

“What was all that about?” Mike asked quietly. El counted the freckles on his nose – one two three four five six –

“Nothing.” El shrugged, turning back to the movie and leaning against him. Mike wiggled his arm.

Underneath the blanket, their hands found each other.

---

“They’re so gross.” Dustin said, scrunching up his nose and watching Max and Lucas talk from across the cafeteria. El rolled her eyes and turned around. She watched them lean forward, unsure, and then envelop each other in a tight hug. Lucas disappeared out the doors, off to lunch period study hall.

Max turned around to head for the table, but the four of them were all staring at her.

She ducked her head and started to cross the room, a blush creeping up her neck.

“What do you expect?” Mike asked around a mouthful of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, reaching for his bottle of water on the table. “They were made for each other.”

“Just because they’re soulmates doesn’t mean they have to be all touchy-touchy all the time –”

“Someday, Dustin, you’ll understand.” El said wistfully, turning to look at him. She perched her chin in her palm and turned her gaze away, toward the windows. “Someday you’ll understand *true* love --”

“Being soulmates doesn’t equal being in love.” Dustin replied, and El snapped her attention toward him.

“Why are you being so negative?” Will asked, frowning at him. Dustin shifted in his seat, uncomfortable, and scooted away when Max tried to sit right next to him.

“What? Do I smell or something?” Max asked, sitting down.

“He doesn’t want your cooties.” Mike muttered, and Will giggled. Mike glanced up to look at El; she was smiling at him.

Her birthday was in a week.

Her head started to hurt whenever she thought about it for too long. She threw the thought out of her mind and her gaze was stuck on Max’s wrist – she’d stopped covering it that day at El’s house.

Max and Lucas had ducked outside just to ‘talk’ and ended up going to the park together and ditching the rest of them.

The next day, they were holding hands and saying the words ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’. El put on a grin and said she was happy for them, but her anxiety about Max’s situation quickly shifted over to her own.

Mike’s t-shirt was pulled down over his own scar. Even as the days got warmer and edged into summer, he still wore long sleeves. The



bandages probably bothered him.

Max turned her head and pursed her lips, blowing her breath into Dustin's face. "Ugh! Max, stop!" Dustin, said, waving a hand around.

"Cooties." She mumbled, turning her attention to her backpack to pull out her lunch. "So – El. Did you want to do anything the day before your birthday to celebrate?"

"Um." El paused in thought and shifted in her seat. "I don't really know –"

"We can just get you a cake." Mike suggested, "And we can go to the arcade. Play some good ol' –"

"We *always* got to the arcade." Dustin replied, rolling his eyes, "That's not *special*. Our little Jane is turning *sixteen*." Dustin reached over to pinch El's cheek. She huffed and pushed his hand away.

"We can probably borrow my mom's or Jonathan's car and drive to the mall." Will suggested. El bit down on the inside of her cheek.

The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to just – ignore it. Be alone.

She'd been there for Max's, but if Max was there for hers and it was Mike –

Or if it *wasn't* Mike –

"I don't think I really want to do anything." El said, and Mike frowned. "I'm too nervous to really do much."

"We can do something after your birthday." Max suggested, "To celebrate you and the fact that it's over."

El stuck her tongue in her cheek. "Yeah." She said, faking a smile and nodding her head – then adding, "Maybe."

---

“Hey, El, are you okay?” Mike asked.

El turned around to face him. She was waiting for her dad to come pick her up, and Mike was perched on his bike, leaning over the handlebars.

None of them had cars yet, but Max was working part-time after school at a flower shop (a *flower shop*) in town to save up for a car. Lucas thought he was getting one for his sixteenth birthday, but his parents flaked and ended up just getting him a bunch of sweaters and video games instead.

“I’m fine.” She said, forcing a smile at him. “Just got a headache.”

“I’m sorry.” He said, shifting on his bike.

A silence settled between them, and El turned around to look at the parking lot.

“Do you want a ride home? Like when we were kids?” Mike asked, and El turned around to face him again.

He looked hopeful; halfway excited, even.

El paused, and she nodded. If he didn’t see her waiting, he’d think she just started walking home anyways.

“Okay. Sure.”

---

El wrapped her arms around Mike’s middle as he pedaled. “So Mrs. Logan was super pissed for the rest of the class, and she told us that if we ever did something like that again, she’d write every single one of us detention slips.” Mike said, standing up on the pedals. El pressed her cheek against his back, and she shut her eyes.

She really felt like she was eleven again.

“Wow.” El mumbled against his shirt, “What a –”

“Total asshole.” Mike muttered, and El laughed against his back. Mike turned down her street. He stopped in front of her house and El hopped off, sliding his backpack off her shoulder. She handed it to him and he slung it over his shoulder. “Thanks for holding it.”

“It’s easier for me to hold on if I carry it.” She said, glancing at her house. “Uh – thanks for the ride home.”

“You’re welcome.” Mike said, though he stepped off his bike and pushed the kickstand up. “Did you – um – can I come in?”

“Oh.” El crossed her arms over her stomach and looked down at her feet.

In any other week, she’d say yes, but the worry and anxiety was building a brick wall around her. She didn’t want to talk to her dad or Max or Lucas or Dustin or Will or even *Mike*.

Mike, who was her best friend, who she’d held hands with, who was her first kiss in middle school (though they’d never dated, because of the whole soulmate thing) – Mike, who had been there through her whole life and who had been so kind and sweet to her all those years ago and been her first proper friend since her dad adopted her and she moved to Hawkins.

She looked up at him, and he was staring at her expectantly.

“Okay.” She said, as if she could ever say anything else.

She turned around on her heel and hopped up the few steps, crossing her front porch and tugging her key out of her backpack. She unlocked the door and nudged it open, letting Mike in first before following, shutting and locking it behind her. “You want a snack?” She asked, and he nodded and followed her into the kitchen. “We have apples, oranges, uh – probably a frozen pizza, if you want something like that –”

“I’ll just have an apple. Thanks, El.”

“You’re welcome.” She said, tossing it to him. He rubbed it against his shirt and took a bite. “I’ve been making my dad buy healthier stuff instead of those little snack cakes and stuff like that.”

“Ew. Why?” Mike asked, scrunching up his nose.

“I’m on a diet.” She said, turning around to face him, digging her nail into the skin of an orange. Mike raised his eyebrows at her and she scoffed. “I’m kidding. My dad is.”

“Did you dad ever get a soulmate scar?” Mike asked, and El fumbled with the skin. She tore off a big chunk and threw it into the trashcan.

“Yeah. He didn’t care, though. He married someone and they ended up getting a divorce, and he hasn’t, like – I don’t know. He just doesn’t – care, I guess. Which is fine.”

“My parents’ don’t match.” Mike said, taking a bite out of his apple. “That’s not really a surprise, though.”

“Nope.” El said, thinking of the Wheelers, who smiled only in pictures and scowled anytime else. Mrs. Wheeler was great; pretty, nice, and a good cook. But Mr. Wheeler was – in Mike’s words – “kind of a douche.”

“My sister doesn’t have one.” Mike mumbled, and El practically dropped her orange.

She’d heard of people not having them, but she’d never actually *known* someone that didn’t. It was always ‘my cousin’s friend’s friend doesn’t have one’ or ‘I heard that Lindsey said that Charlotte said that her sister Kate’s boyfriend’s brother doesn’t have one’.

But Nancy Wheeler?

“She’s – you’re lying.” El said, giggling and tearing off a piece of the orange, biting into it. Sticky juice ran down her fingers. “Nancy totally has one.”

“She showed me.” Mike said, staring at El. “I promise.”

“You *promise*?” El said, furrowing her brow. “I didn’t think that was possible.”

“It is. She cried for like, a week, and then did a bunch of research and figured it would probably just show up late, but it never came.” Mike

said, chewing on his lip.

“Maybe her soulmate hasn’t been born yet.”

“The universe accounts for big age gaps like that.”

“That doesn’t make *sense*.” El said, grabbing a napkin and setting her orange down on top of it. She grabbed a cup and went to the sink, filling it with water and gulping it down. She stared at her blank wrist.

She’d always imagined it with initials – she’d never stopped to think that maybe it would stay blank forever.

“I don’t think that’ll happen to you.” Mike said quickly, throwing his apple core into the sink and walking over to her, wrapping his fingers around her wrist. He swiped his thumb over the patch of skin where they both knew it would be.

Seven days.

“I think you have a soulmate.” Mike said, and El looked up at him to meet his gaze. He wasn’t staring at her wrist. He was staring at her face. “Even if you don’t, you’ll still fall in love and get married.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You’re you, El.” Mike said, blushing. “Who wouldn’t want to fall in love with you?”

“Mike.” She said, smiling and lowering her wrist. “Shut up. You’re an idiot.”

“Am not!” He laughed, moving his other hand to hers, their fingers brushing. She pulled her wrist out of his grip and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him down into a tight hug. “Hey!”

El hugged him tightly, her heart hammering against her chest. She was sure he could feel it, their bodies pressed together in her kitchen.

He wound his arms around her waist and hugged her tighter, pressing his face into her hair.

“Thank you, Mike.” She mumbled into his neck, and she felt him turn his head.

He pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“You’re welcome, El.” He said, pulling away from her and raising a hand to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. He was blushing furiously, his entire face red from his forehead down to his neck.

The sleeve of his t-shirt had lifted, and if she wanted, in that moment, she could have turned and looked at it. All it would take is a glance, a fraction of a second to read two letters.

She brushed her fingers against his cheek and turned away. “I’ve got homework.” She said, reaching for her orange. “And my dad will probably be home soon –”

“Gotcha.” Mike said, taking a step backwards and walking into the fridge. “Oh!”

“See you tomorrow?” She asked, and turned around to smile at him. He was already out the door.

---

“You still want me to come over?” Max asked, and El wedged the phone between her shoulder and her ear. The damp wash cloth was folded up in her hand. She’d just woken up, her hair a mess, but she wasn’t sure when it would happen.

Now, she wasn’t sure if it would happen.

But she was *sure* of something: if those letters on her wrist didn’t read M.W., she was suing the universe for everything it had.

“I’d actually kind of prefer to be alone.” El said, and squeezed her eyes shut – waiting for the aftermath, the whining, the sadness.

The disappointment, because Max would take this like an insult. But instead: “Oh, that’s okay. You know I’m just a phone call away, right?” Max said, and El nodded.

She'd be headed to Mike's as soon as it was over. He'd be waiting in his basement.

"Yeah, totally. And I'll call you tonight, no matter what."

"Okay. Is your dad home?"

"Yeah. Just in case there's an emergency or whatever."

"Okay." Max said. Pause. It was a delicate subject for everyone, one that was hard to trudge through. Max finally, after a minute of El staring down at that cold washcloth, continued: "Good luck."

"Thanks, Max." El replied, and then: "I love you."

"I love you, too, El. Bye."

"Bye."

*Click.*

El set the phone back on the receiver, but played with the curly cord in her hand. She squeezed the washcloth and let the cold water run through her palm, then soak back up. She laid on her bed, crossed her ankles, uncrossed them. Sat up, crossed her legs instead. Tried to read a book, then a comic, then work on some of her math homework.

Nothing worked. She was stuck waiting impatiently for something she wasn't sure was even coming. She leaned her head back against the wall and turned her eyes up to the ceiling. She counted glow-in-the-dark stars she'd stuck up there when she first moved in with her dad, to her first bedroom that was really just *hers*.

In hours -- mintues-- maybe *seconds*, she'd find out who she was supposed to spend the rest of her life with. Supposedly. Things didn't always work out that way but – *god*, El hoped things worked out that way.

She thought of Mike's freckles and his eyes and the way he laughed at her jokes even when no one else did, even if it was just a pity laugh, so he could see her smile. She thought about his kindness, his

intelligence, how he lent her his jacket on cold nights, how he was always the first one she wanted to talk to when the party got together.

She thought about his hands and the way they held her own, how his lips felt on her skin, how they had felt on her own all those years ago.

Sparks, fireworks, whatever. Electricity pulling them together, because they *had* to be meant to be.

*Dear universe*, she thought, biting down hard on her tongue, her eyes squeezing shut, *please let me be bound to Mike Wheeler*.

A searing pain.

El shoved the washcloth into her mouth and grabbed a pillow, pressing her face into it as she screamed. Unbearable pain, like someone was cutting her arm off. Digging into her skin, her veins, her muscle, her bone. Someone was marking her, changing her, forcing her life into a direction she wasn't sure she wanted. It was the pain of losing something, almost like a freedom of choice, because this was it. This was who she would be with, this was what her destiny was, this was *fate* working.

It shut off, like unplugging a lamp or flicking a light switch. El pushed the pillow away and pulled the cloth from her mouth and gasped for clean air.

And then, she looked.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

this one is obviously quite a bit shorter because the one yesterday was so long, but i love this au so much / forgive me if it's already been done b/c i know it's fairly popular!!! hmu on tumblr @timetravl if you have any prompts etc and leave me a comment if you liked it!! ty for reading lovelies <3 have a wonderful day!



## 5. gum

### Summary for the Chapter:

mike and el have chemistry together, and dustin really wants them to get together

OR

juicy fruit, chemistry homework, and a lot of deja vu

### Notes for the Chapter:

NOT a continuation of sixteen / I know you guys really wanted more of that, but the ambiguous ending feels so right to me that I just can't bear to write anymore onto it.

forgive me, and take this little fic to make up for it  
<3

“Is that gum?” El asked, leaning forward in her seat and over Mike’s shoulder. He turned his head to look at her; their noses brushed and she laughed, withdrawing slightly. He held up the pack of juicy fruit and she bit down on her bottom lip, smiling at him.

“Yeah. You want a piece?” He asked, slipping one of the sticks out of the pack and holding it out for her. She plucked it from his hand with her slender fingers, unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth. She leaned back into her own seat, and picked up her pen.

“Thanks, Mike.” She said, and he glanced back at her. She was already back to working on their chemistry assignment.

He turned around to look at his own fingers, but now all he could think about was the girl behind him. *Shit.*

The bell rang five minutes later and Mike stood up, relieved, and tucked the assignment into his backpack to finish at home. Home, which didn’t have any distractions in it: no curly brown hair, hazel eyes, soft hand-me-down cardigans, rolled up jeans, overalls –

Okay. Getting off topic.

Mike turned around and watched El pack her things up in her backpack before slinging it over her shoulder. They walked side-by-side out of the classroom, squeezing through the doorway with each other.

“Did you finish the work?” Mike asked her, and El shook her head.

“Nah. I’m horrible at chem. Atoms, protons, neutrons – don’t know the difference.” She huffed, waving a hand around. “I’ll have to go to tutoring. But *that* sucks because Mrs. Thompson is such a jerk when people don’t get it right the *first time* –”

“I could help you out.” Mike said, stealing a glance at her. She turned and met his gaze, and flashed him a smile.

“Really?”

“Yeah! I’m great at chemistry.” Mike said, and it wasn’t a lie, either. He was top of the class in all of his science classes. Max was at the top in English, Dustin in history. Lucas was great at everything, and El had extracurriculars by the tail.

“Hm.” El paused and twisted her mouth, casting her eyes upward with a ‘thinking’ face. “I’d love that.”

“Great! You can just ride home with me after school and call your dad when we get to my house.” Mike said, grinning at her. “We’ll be done before dinner, but my mom will probably make you stay –”

“Thank god.” El said, pressing a hand to her chest. “Mike, your mom is so much better at cooking than my dad –”

“Your dad’s cooking isn’t *terrible*.” Mike muttered, but El gave him a look.

“All he cooks is frozen pizzas and TV dinners. It’s a hassle trying to get him to cook green beans. And all you have to do with those is put them in a pan with some oil and salt or something like that –”

“Woah, woah, woah, woah.” Mike held up a hand and stopped

walking, “You’re criticizing his cooking when you don’t even know how to cook?”

“He’s old. I’m fifteen. I get to be critical.” El replied, and Mike laughed and continued walking beside her.

Max bumped her hip up against El’s as she came up on her other side, sending her nearly flying into Mike. He caught her by the waist (*shit!*) and righted her, causing Max to giggle and point at the two of them.

“You guys get married last period or something?”

“Shut up, Max.” Mike replied, and El was too busy blushing to come up with something to say. Lucas came up behind Max and slipped his arms around her, pulling her backwards. She yelped and spun around, punching him in the arm. “And you’re making fun of us? Really?”

“We’re not even dating.” El said, moving her hands to the pockets of her jeans, shifting on her feet. Lucas and Max were too busy – *ugh* – kissing to respond.

Mike tilted his head and nodded down the hall. “Wanna keep walking?”

“You bet.” El said, sighing and turning around. They walked down the hall and turned into the cafeteria. Will and Dustin were already sitting at the lunch table, talking loudly about something that had happened in Mr. Gilbert’s art class –

“There’s a reason everyone calls him *Gilbutt*, okay, Will?” Dustin said, grinning. “The guy is a *farting machine*.”

“There’s no way that smell was him. It was totally *rancid*. It smelled like someone set off a -- a stink bomb or something!” Will laughed, slamming his palm against the table.

“Ask *anyone*. The guy’s got a reputation for stinking up a room.” Dustin said, grinning at Mike and El as they slid into the seats across from them. “Hey, guys. Where’s Lucas and Max?”

“Where do you think?” El asked, rolling her eyes and glancing over at

the cafeteria door. Max and Lucas were laughing loudly at their own jokes, fingers intertwined, walking shoulder-to-shoulder.

Subconsciously, El scooted a bit closer to Mike. He glanced over at her, and did the same.

“Repulsive.” Dustin said, shaking his head as the two split; Lucas sitting next to Dustin, Max sitting next to El. “Do you guys think everyone at Hawkins High *likes* seeing that?”

“Totally.” Max said, tugging her lunch bag out of her backpack, ripping it open and tugging out her sandwich. “You think everyone at Hawkins High likes smelling your farts?”

“Please.” Dustin sighed, holding up a hand. “Max, you should know by now –”

“New theory.” Will said, tapping his fingers against the table and then pointing it like a gun, turning to Dustin. “I bet *you* caused the farts in Gilbutt’s class!”

“Wrong!” Dustin said, shaking his head and shrugging. “That’s just positively wrong, Will.”

“You want my brownie?” El asked, holding out a tinfoil-wrapped square to Mike. “I’m not that hungry.”

“Oh. Okay!” Mike said, taking it from her and unwrapping it. “You sure?”

“Yeah. My dad always burns ‘em just a little bit, anyways. I like mine soft.”

“Thanks, El.” Mike said, taking a bit. His teeth barely sank into the brownie; it was hard as a rock. “Oh.”

El sighed and stared at the brownie for a moment before grabbing it and wrapping it back up, tossing it into the trashcan. “Good riddance.”

Mike laughed and El smiled at him, their shoulders bumping against each other. The lunch tables were made for four people, but day after

day the entire party squeezed into one of them. Mike's knee was pressed against El's under the table, and she reached down to scratch her own and ended up accidentally scratching his instead.

"Sorry." She giggled, moving her hand. "I feel like a sardine."

"And you look like one, too." Max said, and El gasped and punched her in the arm. Mike laughed at them, and Lucas tossed his dirty napkin in Mike's direction.

"What do you think, Mikey?" Dustin asked, leaning across the table. "You think El looks like a sardine?"

"Didn't say that." Mike said, blushing and ducking his head. He glanced up at Will for help, but Will was smiling mischievously at him as Dustin continued to prod.

"Oh, really? 'Cause I think El totally looks like a little slimy fish." Dustin said, and El kicked his shin under the table and rolled her eyes.

"Don't listen to 'im, El." Mike said, rolling his eyes. "You're not slimy."

"Oh, but I am a little fish?" El asked, raising her eyebrows.

"No! You're – pretty."

"And there we have it, folks." Dustin said, clapping his hands and elbowing Will in the side. "You owe me a buck."

"I really thought you had more willpower than that, Mike." Will sighed, reaching into his pocket and pulling out four quarters.

"I don't know why you would think Mike could go an entire lunch period without complimenting El." Dustin sighed, shaking his head. El blushed and glanced away, reaching over to steal one of Max's potato chips.

"You guys are so annoying." Mike muttered, picking at his sandwich. The lunch bell rang and Lucas and Max were the first to stand up, reaching for their bags and walking away hand-in-hand.

Will left next, hurrying off to algebra so he could ask the teacher a question before class started.

El slowly pulled away from Mike, and the right side of his body suddenly felt empty and cold. She flashed him a small smile before slinging her bag over her shoulder and nodding toward the door. "I'm heading to English. See you later?"

*Tutoring.* Mike flushed red again and nodded, standing up and reaching for his own bag as she walked away. "See ya."

Dustin walked around the table and wrapped an arm around Mike's shoulder, but Mike quickly shrugged him off and shook his head. "Dustin, you've got to stop doing that."

"What? Maybe if I point out how much you guys *love* each other –"

"Don't get it twisted." Mike said, shaking his head and heading for the door. Dustin followed; sadly, they had the next period together. Mike would be perfectly happy spending the rest of the day without him and the El nagging that was sure to come. "It makes her uncomfortable."

"She totally has a crush on you." Dustin said, and Mike's head snapped up to look at him.

"No. She doesn't."

"Oh, come *on*." Dustin said, throwing his arms up into the air. "You were her first friend when she got here at the beginning of the year. Now you guys are like, inseparable –"

"She's just fun to be around! She's sweet –"

"And she always smells good, huh?"

"Yeah. And she wears these soft sweaters –"

"Oh, really?"

"And her hair is really nice. It bounces because of the curls, and it's so beautiful –"

“Oh, wow! Tell me more.”

“And – okay, Dustin, fuck off.” Mike groaned, opening the door to their class. Dustin stopped him, grabbing him by his t-shirt.

“Listen, man.” Dustin said, staring at him. “You and El are like – *totally* meant to be.”

“We have to get to class.”

“It’s her first day in Hawkins and who does she run into? You. Who becomes her best friend? You. You even took her to homecoming –”

“As *friends* –”

“You guys kissed!”

Mike paused and cast his gaze to the ground. He’d taken her to homecoming because it was the beginning of the year and she was the New Girl. She was nervous, shy, and no one knew her name or anything about her except for Mike. Besides, she was cute and all of his friends liked her. Why wouldn’t he ask her?

As for the kiss – who *doesn’t* kiss their homecoming date? It’s *rude* not to –

“Okay, so what?”

“Tell me that’s not soulmate-material right there.” Dustin said, crossing his arms.

“Don’t say that. Dustin, you’re being *such* a cheese ball right now –”

“And you’re being ridiculous. She likes you, you like her –”

“So?” Mike asked weakly. He knew the *so*, but he couldn’t bear to even think about it. It was such an enormous *so* that if he let himself think about it, he’d be thinking about it all day.

“I have a plan to get you two together.”

“Dustin, your plans always suck.” Mike groaned, leaning against the

classroom door.

The warning bell rang, and Mike went to open the door. This time, Dustin let him.

“Hear me out –”

“After class, okay?” Mike sighed, entering the classroom.

“Sure.” Dustin smiled, heading to his own seat on the other side of the room from Mike’s.

*Great*, Mike thought, his mind stuck on caramel curls and brown eyes, her homecoming dress and cherry chapstick – *I’m royally fucked.*

---

“You ready to go?” Mike asked, shoving his bike lock into his backpack. He slid onto his bike and El jumped on behind him, wrapping her arms tightly around his middle.

“Born ready.” She said, tightening her arms as he began to peddle. “Hey, do you want to take Marymount?”

“The long way home?” Mike asked, glancing down to look at her hands. He cast his eyes straight to focus on the road, but it was like he could feel every spot on his skin where she was touching him.

“Yeah! There’s that big hill we can go down –”

“You want to go fast?” Mike asked, and El laughed – she pressed her cheek against his back, and his heart practically jumped out of his chest.

“Duh.”

“Have you talked to your dad about getting a bike of your own?” Mike asked, and El shrugged and sat up so she could rest her chin on his shoulder. The wind whistled past them as Mike pedaled faster; he stopped pedaling and they cruised down a small hill, turning around a corner.



“Since I’m getting my license next year, he kind of wants to skip the bike and get me a car.”

“Wow.” Mike replied, raising his eyebrows. “I thought your dad was strict.”

“He is.” She said, sighing. “He’d make me get a job and pay for the gas and everything if he got it for me. And it’s definitely not a for-sure thing yet, but – you know. Being adopted has its perks.”

Mike laughed, and El giggled into his ear. “He spoils you.”

“Yeah. I can’t even deny it. It’s totally true.” El laughed, tightening her arms around him as they made a fast turn. “You really go on this thing, huh?”

“Yeah. Remember when we first met?”

“You almost ran me over!” She laughed, and Mike smiled at the memory.

It was the spring before their freshman year of high school. El had finished her school year early in another city, so she was spending a few months off to get adjusted to – her new dad. Her new town. Her new life.

She’d gone out for a walk to get a better feel of the town, and Mike had nearly run over her as she was crossing the street and he was rushing to the arcade to meet his friends.

He hadn’t gone to the arcade that day. But he had taken her to the quarry and the scrapyard and the lake, and they’d skipped stones and laughed at each other’s shitty jokes and –

Mike’s heart fluttered in his chest. El sighed and smiled, pressing her face into the fabric of his t-shirt.

He’d only known her for a year. But it felt like his whole life; had he even had a life before her? She was there for late night phone calls and study sessions, Star Wars and horror movie marathons on the weekends, Dungeons and Dragons and monopoly, stargazing and fort building – all of it.

Mike pressed on his brakes slightly as they approached Marymount, and when they got to the top of the hill, El squealed.

They went down fast, and El screamed the whole way (into his ear, but he could barely hear her over his heart beating in his ears).

Three more turns and they were at his house, jumping off his bike and setting it in the garage before heading inside.

“Mom!” Mike yelled, peeking into the kitchen.

“Michael! Quiet, Holly’s sleeping.” Mrs. Wheeler said, covering the receiver of the phone with her hand. El popped her head into the kitchen and Mrs. Wheeler softened, flashing her a small smile. “Hi, El. Mike, there’s a fruit tray in the fridge –”

Mike was already heading over there. He tugged out a platter of apple slices and caramel, and then left the kitchen again. El followed him down to the basement.

El shut the basement door behind her and bounded down the stairs after Mike, running and jumping onto the sofa. She slipped her backpack off and dumped it on the floor, tucking her arms behind her head.

“Comfy?” Mike asked, setting the tray on the coffee table. She lifted her legs so he could sit on the other end of the sofa, and then she crossed her ankles and dropped her feet onto her lap.

“Always.” She said, reaching over and grabbing an apple slice, biting into it with a crunch. “Did you write the new campaign for this weekend yet?”

“I haven’t had the time. I’m not sure if I want to make it a sort of encore campaign, or make something totally new –”

“Encore!” El said, sitting up. “That campaign was *crazy* good. Really, Mike, all you’ve done is gotten better. It’s like every single one of them turns into like – a movie!”

Mike blushed and reached for an apple. El picked up the little container of caramel, and Mike dipped his apple into it.

“Messy.” El laughed, reaching up and using her thumb to wipe away some caramel that had dripped onto Mike’s chin.

*I could kiss her right now*, Mike thought, and his stomach twisted. Instead of leaning forward (*it would be so easy so just do it you idiot!*), he reached for his backpack. “Uh – Chemistry?”

“Ours?” El asked. Mike furrowed his brow at her and she pulled her thumb away. “Oh! *Chemistry*. Right.”

She reached for her backpack and tugged out her binder, and Mike pulled out his own. She moved her legs and scooted to sit next to him instead. He handed her a pen and she pulled out the worksheet, staring at it. “So – what don’t you understand?”

“Um – well, you could look at this first and tell me if any of it is wrong.” El said, pointing to her worksheet. Mike leaned over and stared down at her paper.

Most of it was wrong, but she’d gotten a few things right. He marked the right problems with his pen, and El glanced over at his worksheet; it was mostly blank.

“Sorry. I’m a bit of work.” El said, and Mike smiled at her.

“It’s fine. Chem is hard. I hope I’m a better tutor than Mrs. Thompson –” Mike said, and El laughed and nudged his side.

“As long as you don’t smell weird or spit when you talk, then yeah. You’re way better than Mrs. Thompson.” El said, and Mike grinned at her.

*Shit*, he thought, *the gum*.

“Uh – you want some gum?” He asked, reaching into his backpack for the juicy fruit. El nodded, dropping her pen and holding out her hand.

“Juicy fruit’s my favorite!” She smiled, and Mike plucked the special piece from the pack and put it in her hand. She started to unwrap it and – “Oh.”

Scrawled on the top of the wrapper, Dustin had told Mike to write: *I dare you to tell me who you have a crush on.*

“Are we in the fifth grade or something?” El asked, and Mike couldn’t hide the fact that that stung a bit. She smiled afterwards, and when he realized she was just joking, he smiled back at her. He shifted uncomfortably and motioned to the piece.

“It’s a dare.”

“Wait, you expect me to actually tell you?” She asked, laughing slightly. “Mike, c’mon. I came over to work on this –”

“You seemed pretty content with just eating apple slices a couple minutes ago.” Mike muttered, and El raised her eyebrows at him. She pulled the piece of gum from the wrapper and stuck it in her mouth. She chewed on it and blew a bubble.

It popped.

“Alright. You want to know who I have a crush on?” El asked, and Mike turned to her.

“Uh – yeah.”

“He has this really cute, brown, curlyish hair.” She started, setting her chin in her hand as she chewed, “He has really cute eyes, too. And he’s good at Chemistry.”

Mike’s heart fluttered in his chest. *Oh.*

“But he doesn’t write dares on gum wrappers, because he’s not stupid and immature like his friends. I mean, come on!” El said, balling up the wrapper and throwing it at him.

“That sounded a lot like me until that last part.” Mike said, and El blushed and rolled her eyes at him.

“It would’ve been you about five minutes ago –”

“You know, El –”

“What is it, Wheeler?” She asked, her whole face flushed red. “Are you going to try and embarrass me again?”

“I wasn’t trying to embarrass you.” He said, scrunching up his nose. “El, that’s not what this was.”

“Really? ‘Cause I feel – embarrassed. I feel awkward now, and I kind of just want to call my dad –” Her eyes widened. “Shit! I forgot to call him!”

She jumped up from the couch and immediately started to run upstairs, but Mike ran after her and caught her by the wrist, spinning her around. “El!”

“What, Mike?”

“Do you like me?” He asked, trying to fix the shakiness in his voice and the tightening he felt in his chest. Her hard eyes immediately softened, and she relaxed in his grip.

“Do you like me?” She asked quietly, and he dropped her hand.

“I asked you first.” Mike managed, and El bit down on her lip and glanced away. “It’s – okay if you don’t. I get it, I mean –”

“You’re a dork.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“I can’t believe you would ever think –”

“I know.” Mike said, deflating and looking away.

“Oh my god, *Mike*.” El laughed, her hands moving to his cheeks. She turned his face toward her and leaned in.

They kissed, sweetly, and his hands went to her waist and her hands left his cheeks and went around to his neck, pulling him closer.

“You idiot. Of course, I like you.” El said, grinning at him.

For some reason, her face looked so familiar – and not because he’d

obviously seen her before. This was different. He had an itching feeling he'd seen her before, somewhere, like in a magazine or on a tv show. Had he read about her in a book? Mike gazed at her and suddenly felt like he was in a comic with a movie adaption and a toy franchise. Like there were copies of him, everywhere, and they were all tangled up with an El Hopper.

He leaned in and kissed her again, for what felt like the millionth time. She grinned against his lips and kissed him back, her fingers reaching up into his hair –

The basement door opened.

“Goodness!” Mrs. Wheeler cried out, and Mike immediately pulled away from El to look upstairs.

“*Mom!*” Mike said, blushing furiously.

“Chief Hopper is here.” Mrs. Wheeler said, staring down at them.  
“Um – basement door needs to stay open from now on –”

“*Mom!*” Mike cried out. El was too busy giggling to care.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

i'm starting to think about making an overarching PLOT to this but that's hard and i go back to school TOMORROW, hence not posting yesterday and breaking my streak :/ BUT if you enjoyed this and do want to see more, leave me a kudos or a comment and lmk <3 your comments mean the absolute world to me, and i read them and reread them over and over again. i'll probably reply to some this week, i've just been super busy.

thank you so much for reading!

## **6. the stars have led me back to you, every time, every time, every time**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

things end and people change, but el will never fall out of love / and neither will mike

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

oops. it's angst!

kind of. more of just -- sad? with a happy ending.

ALSO THIS ISN'T REALLY AN AU???!?? like to me this definitely wouldn't happen in the show but also it's based off canon completely so??? not sure if this even fits with this series or not, but it feels right to post it here

i've written so much fluff lately that i needed to be miserable for a few minutes (LOL), and i've also just started a new semester at school so excuse the lateness (kind of, i refuse to make a schedule) of this update!

### **Summer, 1989**

"I can't do this anymore." Mike said, setting his fork down. It rattled against his plate and she looked up at him, her eyes narrowing.

"What?" El asked, setting down her fork more carefully than he had. She reached for her water, but when she started to pick it up, she realized her hands were shaking.

She let go of the water and balled them into fists, pressing them between her thighs.

"I can't do this anymore. I'm – El, are you happy?"

"Yes. I am very happy." She replied, though she tasted the ingenuity

on her own tongue. She grimaced and looked away.

“You’re not. I can see it on your face. This is so stupid.” Mike whispered, standing up from the table.

Their three year anniversary in Hopper’s kitchen. In two weeks, Mike and all of her friends would be leaving for different colleges. El would be doing community college and working for Hopper.

Twelve years of no proper education hindered her more than she thought it would.

“This whole summer, you’ve been – so *weird*. Because you’re upset that I’m leaving –”

“I’m not upset that you’re leaving.” She replied, looking up at him. He crossed his arms across the front of his dress shirt.

He’d dressed up for tonight. She had, too, in a pretty blue dress that Nancy had helped her pick out at the mall. She glanced down at it, and all she could think was *what a waste*.

“Then why do you shut down when I talk about it?” Mike asked, pressing a hand to the table. “Why do you get so sad--?”

“Because you’re leaving me.” El shrugged, glancing up at him. She shrunk down in her seat.

“You’re supposed to be *happy* for me –”

“Don’t think for a second that I’m not.” She said, fumbling with her napkin. “I’m very happy for you. I’m just going to miss you. A *lot*. More than you think I will, and not having you here is going to *suck* \_”

“It’ll suck for me not having you there, too.” Mike said, kneeling down next to her chair. She turned toward him and he cupped her face in his hands. “But are you happy, El? Can we – can we make long-distance work?”

El stared at him.



They hadn't really talked about it as much as she would have thought they would. It was one of those assumed things; oh, Mike got into MIT and El didn't? It's okay. There's still winter and summer breaks, phone calls and letters, surprise visits on the long weekends –

Something flipped in her stomach. Maybe she made the wrong assumptions.

"I thought we could." She replied, pushing his hands away and standing from her seat. She left the table and walked into the living room, sitting down on the couch. It was more comfortable here (and she could curl up under a blanket and hold herself when she started crying).

"I thought we could, too. But we can't if you're – jealousy gets in the way."

"Jealousy?" El said, staring at him. She stood up again quickly, walking toward him. "You think I'm jealous of you?"

"I used the wrong wording there."

"You think I'm jealous you get to go to some fucking university in – I don't even fucking know where – while I'm stuck here? You think I'm jealous you get to go to a school where you know no one and you have to start over? You think I'm jealous that you get to have MIT and all I get is Hawkins?"

Mike stared at her. He opened his mouth to say something, but no words fell out.

"I'm jealous of MIT. I'm jealous that MIT gets to see you every day, I'm jealous that MIT gets to hear all of your thoughts and your feelings and I'm jealous that MIT – MIT is probably going to make your life better in ways that I never can –"

"El." Mike said, and something in his expression softened. He reached for her, but she took a step back and away from his touch.

"Don't touch me right now, Mike." She said, wrapping her arms around herself. "Don't start fights when you don't understand why I'm upset."

“I wasn’t trying to start a fight. I was trying to have a discussion.”

“Bullshit. And Mike, if – if you’re so unhappy – leave.”

“I’m not unhappy. I thought you were, I – El, I love you. Always and forever. Promise.” He said, and she glanced back at him. He looked so stupid, standing in his dress shirt and his slacks in her kitchen, next to a shitty dinner she’d made in an attempt to be romantic. He’d brought her flowers – tulips, her favorite – and a box of chocolates. A love letter, too.

She hadn’t read the love letter yet. She’d probably cry her eyes out for hours.

“I want this to work out. I want us to work out. It’s always been you and me, Mike.” El said, meeting his gaze. “I didn’t think it would be a college that would tear us apart.”

He laughed slightly at that, and took a few steps toward her. This time, she didn’t move away; when his arms wrapped around her and she pressed her face into his shoulder, she knew.

Nothing would be the same for them. Not anymore.

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## Winter, 1989

El spun around in Hopper’s chair, looking out the windows. Max would be coming home from her first semester today; tomorrow, the rest of the boys would come. But Max – she was excited to see Max.

Working as Hopper’s assistant wasn’t as fun as she thought; he was her dad. And he let her get away with *nothing*.

She wanted a cup of coffee on her break? No. No caffeine. She wanted to go out and get lunch? No. He’d already packed her one.

She loved him nonetheless, but she was so *excited* to see one of her best friends – and a girl.

Her heart flew to Mike, who had started writing a little less, but still called every Tuesday and Thursday. Mike, who laughed about research projects and talked about how his roommates partied a little too much; Mike, who came home for Veterans' Day and surprised her with breakfast in bed and flowers on a Friday morning when she wasn't working.

Mike, who was somehow making it work. Mike, who at least seemed happy.

Mike, who she still loved with every fiber of her being. Her Mike.

El spun around in the chair and slammed her feet down to the ground when she saw a flash of red hair outside; and the freckles. She stood up from the seat dizzily and practically sprinted to the door, through the office and then outside – “MAX!”

Max and El collided in a catastrophic hug; Max's skateboard flew to the ground, but she didn't even glance at it. She hugged El back with a ferocity that El matched completely, and El was brought to tears by the familiar smell of her hair.

“I missed you so *fucking* much!” Max cried out, pulling away to look at her. “Oh my god, El, you got a haircut! It's so cute. Reminds me of when we were younger –”

“Max, you look – tan?”

“That's what California will do to you. God, it is freezing out here. Can we get inside?” Max asked, nodding toward the door and shivering. El nodded, and Max leaned forward for another hug, quickly. She was blushing when she pulled away.

“More huggy than usual.”

“I haven't seen my boyfriend or my best friend in months.” Max retorted, defensive. El giggled and opened the door. They headed inside. Hopper glanced up and stared at Max for a second before setting his cup down and walking toward her.

“Well, well, well – is that a Mayfield I see?”

“What’s up, Chief?” Max asked, beaming at him. Hopper smiled back, and reached a hand out to tousle her hair – she wrapped him up in a hug when he wasn’t expecting it.

“Uh – good to see you, too, Max.” Hopper said, awkwardly patting her back. He glanced at El, as if asking, *can you remove her?*

All El did was smile.

Hopper let El leave early to take Max out to dinner at some new local diner neither of them had been to yet; El was buying, despite Max insisting she wouldn’t.

They slid into a booth, across from each other, Max’s skateboard underneath the table. They put their feet on top of it and rolled it back and forth, giggling whenever it got close to flying out and hitting a waitress in the ankles.

“You and Lucas okay?” El asked, and Max nodded as she sipped a cup of coffee.

“We’re okay. Things got a little shitty right before Thanksgiving break, when I told him I wasn’t coming back and my mom was coming out to California to visit me.”

“He can’t blame you for that.” El said, staring down at the menu. “I’d do the same thing if it kept me from seeing Billy and your step-dad.”

“Yeah. He eventually figured that out.” Max said, glancing up at the waitress as she walked by. “El, can you order for me?”

“Two giant waffles, extra whipped cream.” El said to the waitress. She disappeared again.

“I don’t know why I could ever expect you to pick anything else.” Max said, smiling at her. “And – you and Mike?”

“We’re okay.” El said, tapping her fingers against the table. “I’m worried.”

“About?”

“Tomorrow, when he comes home. Because it’s been all this time of not seeing each other, and now we have a month together –”

“You’re worried about what, then?”

“I don’t know.” El said, pursing her lips and turning to look out the window. It was getting dark over Hawkins. Streetlights were flickering to life.

She counted the streetlights (ten) before turning back to Max.

“What if it’s not the same? What if he doesn’t – love me anymore?”

“What? He came back to surprise you –”

“I never went to surprise him.”

“Eh. You can make up for that next semester.”

“*And –*” El started, pointing a finger at Max, “he started writing less.”

“Lucas and I don’t write each other.” Max replied, laughing slightly. “Do you guys talk on the phone?”

“Every Tuesday and Thursday.”

“Then what’s the big deal?” Max asked, smiling at El. “I think you’re worried over nothin’.”

The waitress came back with their waffles and slid them onto the table. Max immediately began eating hers, tired from her train ride earlier today, but El picked at hers.

“You must be really worried if you’re not eating a waffle.” Max said, and El glanced up at her.

El nodded. Max finished her waffle in silence, and then took El’s waffle when it was offered to her.

“He loves you, El.”

“I know.”

"You guys are – Mike and El. El and Mike. One of those things that's just meant to – to be a thing, you know? Like Dustin and farting. Totally meant to be."

El couldn't help but laugh; Max grinned at her.

"Alright." El sighed, offering Max a smile. "Thanks, Max."

"Yeah, yeah. Just doing my job."

"So – tell me all about tubular California."

"Oh my god, do *not* start with this again!"

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## **Winter, 1989 - The next day**

"You're not coming today?" Hopper asked her, standing by the door. El was in the kitchen, chewing on an Eggo. She shook her head.

"Mike's coming over soon."

Hopper stood at the door and stared at her for a moment, contemplating on whether or not he ought to lecture her again about all the adult and relationship things he'd already lectured her on before. He glanced at the kitchen table and saw her college textbooks and her open notebooks, and thought about how she'd aced her finals.

He thought about how she spent most of her days in his office spinning in his chair, filing paperwork and running errands for him. He thought about his daughter, waiting endlessly for her friends and her boyfriend to come home.

She'd spent a year waiting to see Mike all those years ago. History was repeating itself.

"Okay." Hopper said, tilting his hat on his head as he turned toward the door. "Have a good day."

“Love you!” She said, and he turned around and smiled at her.

“You too, kiddo.”

He ducked out the door and it shut behind him. She locked it instinctively, still standing in the kitchen, and shoved the rest of her Eggo in her mouth.

She ran to her bedroom, brushed her hair and changed into an outfit she was sure he'd never seen before. She ran to the bathroom, brushed her teeth and washed her face and stared at her reflection for a few minutes.

*He's going to be excited to see you, she thought, staring at herself, he's missed you. He has. He has.*

But still, some part of her ached with anxiety because maybe he hadn't. Maybe he'd had so much fun at MIT he was sad to be home and sad to see her again, and –

Knocking.

She ran out of the bathroom and to the door, the locks already undone, and she flung the door open.

He was the same as always, too tall and hair too long. Freckles splattered across his cheeks, red from the cold.

He stared at her for half a second before scooping her up in his arms and pressing a kiss to her lips.

She squeaked. He stumbled inside, kissing her, shutting the door with his foot. She locked the door again and wrapped her arms around him, her fingers tangling up in his soft hair. She melted against him, her legs turning to jelly, and they slowly made their way across the room until they could topple onto the couch, wrapped in each other.

Like nothing had changed.

“Holy shit.” He whispered, pulling away from her to look at her face, his hands moving from her waist to her cheeks and her hair. “You are so beautiful.”

She was blushing, and she managed to say “You too.”

And then they were on each other again.

An hour later and they’re still holding each other, her face pressed into his chest and his arms wrapped around her like she’s made of sand and might fall away at any moment.

“I love you. I love you. I love you.” He muttered into her hair, and her heart is bouncing out of her chest and around the room because this is nothing like she thought it would be; as if it could have ever been anything different. She carts her fingers through his hair and pulls him down for another kiss, this one sweet, soft, gentle.

“I love you, too, Mike.” She said, pulling away to look at his face. “Mike.”

He’s teary-eyed, staring down at her, and she feels her own tears spring up. She started to cry before he did, but when he sees that first tear on her cheek, he’s gone, too.

They cling to each other in her tiny bed; and for a moment, everything is alright.

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## **Spring, 1990**

The new decade comes and El rests her chin in her hand, staring at the empty convenience store. Spring break is coming soon, and her friends will be back for just a week before disappearing again off to their schools.

Summer can’t come soon enough.

She tapped her fingers against the counter and sighed, straightening her back and stretching. She turned around to fix the cartons of cigarettes and straighten the display sign for the Camels.

The door rings behind her, but she doesn’t turn around yet; not until she hears a rustling noise and then a familiar voice – “I’ll just take



these.”

She whipped around and Mike is standing there, a bouquet of tulips sitting on the counter.

He hadn't called last night, but she'd let it slide because sometimes – sometimes he just forgot. He was busy. He was always so busy now, which was fine, because his life was really starting to pick up out there and who was she to try and stop his dreams, you know?

She stared at him, her eyes wide with disbelief.

She wanted to kiss him, but she's at work and – okay. Fuck it.

She leaned forward and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, and he squeaks and falls toward her. Their lips press together messily but he smiled into the kiss anyways, his hands moving to her waist. But the counter is between them, and he laughed when she bumped her hip into it and groaned.

“When do you get off?” He asked, pulling away to look at her. “You get more and more beautiful every day, I swear –”

“Shut up. An hour.” She said, blushing and reaching for the flowers. “You're not supposed to be here –”

“I took exams early.” He said, and she clutched the cellophane-wrapped flowers to her chest. “To have more time with you.”

“Oh, *Mike*.” She said, looking down at the flowers. She reached into her pocket and tugged out her house key. “Go take them home and put them in some water. I'll be there soon.”

“Where should I wait?” Mike asked, and El sucked on her lip.

“Wherever you want. Kitchen, couch.” She paused, then said – “Bed.”

“On my way.” Mike said, grinning and holding up the key as he spun around on his heel and practically ran for the door. She laughed, her chin falling back into her hand as she watched him run out to his mom's car.

*I'm going to love him forever*, she thought, as he turned around to wave at her before climbing inside, *forever and ever*.

---

## Summer 1990

"How many weeks?" El asked, glancing up from her book.

"Two." He replied. She hummed in reply, and flipped the page a bit harder than she meant to. It ripped. "El."

"Yeah?" She asked, more sigh in her voice than she'd meant. She looked up and he was staring at her, almost sympathetic, but mostly frustrated.

"Do we need to –"

"No." She replied, and cast her eyes back down to her book. "I don't want to talk about it."

"El." He said. She didn't reply, so he sat up and reached for her book. "El Hopper. Would you look at me? Please?"

El looked up at Mike, his hand lowering her book. He took it from her slowly, marking her page and setting it to the side.

"We need to talk about this if you're still upset."

"I'm not upset. I'm fine. This is fine."

"You are most definitely not fine." Mike said, scooting toward her. She sat up and turned, her legs dangling off the couch. He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her toward him. "Tell me what's bothering you."

"You know what's bothering me."

"I really – it could be like a hundred things, El. Just tell me."

"Six months, Mike. Half a year. You won't be here for – for

Thanksgiving, or Christmas. Or New Years’.” She said, and he reached for her chin and tilted her face so she would look at him.

“You said you were okay with it.”

“I lied.”

“Friends don’t lie.”

She pushed his hand away and scoffed, standing up and walking toward her bedroom. More than anything, she wanted him to stop using that stupid mantra against her. She’d loved it all those years ago when they were *kids*.

And now she was nineteen, and her boyfriend had taken some stupid internship and would be gone for more time than she could handle. And she lied to him that she was okay with it, because –

He probably would go even if she wasn’t okay with it.

She scowled.

“Why would you tell me you were okay with it if you weren’t? Why would you lie to me like that? I wouldn’t have taken it if you weren’t –”

“You would have.” El said, turning around and leaning against the doorway of her bedroom, arms crossed tightly on her chest. “You would’ve taken it no matter what.”

“That’s not true, and it hurts me that you think that could possibly even *be* true –”

“I’m just your stupid hometown girlfriend.” She said, turning around and ducking into her bedroom. “Who am I to compete with your dreams?”

“El!” Mike shouted, standing up and walking toward the door. She slammed it shut and slipped into bed, tugging the covers over her. “El, let me in.”

“I don’t want to talk to you, Mike.”

Silence.

“You’re being a baby.”

“And you’re – being – a shitty boyfriend.”

“I’d argue that you’re being a shitty girlfriend.” Mike said, and El pressed her face into her pillow. A minute slipped by, and then – “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

El felt the tears come, fast and hot, and she pressed her face into her pillow so he wouldn’t hear her cry.

“I’m going to leave if you don’t let me in.” He said, and she wanted to shout: *Just go!*

The energy escaped her. Her voice was gone.

The front door opened and shut.

---

## Fall, 1990

Empty.

El took a semester off from school. Mike didn’t come home.

They were broken up, kind of. Not really. Broken up in a way where she wouldn’t be surprised if he came back with another girlfriend, but her heart would still be shattered into a million stupid pieces if he did.

Hopper saw it in her; a light, gone, and he assumed the worst. He didn’t have the courage to bring it up, because if he did, she might cry.

And if she cried, he’d have to kill Wheeler.

So he didn’t ask her about it, and she didn’t talk about it. She went along with work and spent her time at home watching soap operas

and reading letters Max sent her. She started talking to Dustin on the phone, and every once in a while Lucas would call.

No one asked her about Mike, so she assumed he told them it was over between them.

Well.

That was fine, she supposed

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### **Summer, 1990**

Another internship.

He was gone, so the party spent the summer without him.

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### **Summer, 1991**

Lucas and Dustin were gone, off on internships of their own.

Max and El had sleepovers every night, and El finally learned how to skateboard. They kissed each other's cheeks and El listened to Max talk about how she missed Lucas.

When El thought of Mike, she had to excuse herself to the bathroom, turn on the faucet, and cry into a towel.

---

### **Summer, 1992**

El graduated early.

And then she left Hawkins.

---

## Spring, 1994

“How was work?” Max asked. El dropped her bag by the front door and glanced up at her, forcing a small smile.

“Fine.”

“Are you okay?” Max asked, and El nodded and walked into the kitchen, reaching for an apple. “There’s wine in the fridge.”

El was already reaching for it.

They’d moved to Sacramento three weeks ago, with Max working on finding a veterinarian job and El already working at a social work office, checking files and making schedules.

It was an intern-type job, but it paid enough for her to afford rent, and it was one of those nine-to-fives that everyone was after.

She lived with it.

El popped open the wine bottle and took a sip directly from it; and then another, and another.

She glanced out the window today and thought she saw Mike Wheeler across the street. She’d choked on her coffee and then hid in the bathroom for a half hour to cry, thinking: *forever and ever, forever and ever, promise, beautiful, I’ll love him forever.*

She was wrong when she thought they would stay together forever. But she was right about the love thing.

They hadn’t talked or seen each other in four years now. Lucas was moving to Sacramento next week, in an apartment about twenty minutes away from theirs.

Max had refused to tell her who he was rooming with, but El knew it was Mike. It had to be him, if Max wouldn’t tell her. Dustin and Will were still in school, in their last semester, but Dustin was moving somewhere on the east coast and Will was going back to Hawkins to

teach art at the middle school.

Why had she ever agreed to move to fucking California?

“Jesus Christ, El.” Max said, pulling the wine bottle away from her. El was crying, tears running down her face in hot streaks, snot coming out of her nose – “What the fuck *happened?*”

El couldn’t say his name. Max would think it was stupid. It had been four *years*.

*FOUR FUCKING YEARS*, and she was still crying over him and drinking wine straight from the bottle? Who the fuck was she?

“Let’s go out.” El said, sniffing and rubbing the snot from her nose. “Let’s go to a fucking club.”

“Uh –” Max stared at the bottle and then glanced at El. “I’m not sure that’s the best idea –”

“I’m going with or without you.” El said, moving past Max and storming toward her room. “So you get dressed up and go with me, or you stay the fuck home and I go out alone. Your choice.”

El whipped around to look at Max, but she was already heading for her room.

*Good*, El thought, shutting her own bedroom door and immediately going to her closet, *time to get fucked up*.

Three hours later, Max is holding El’s hair as she vomits into a toilet in a bar.

“Sometimes, I really hate you.” Max sighed, leaning against the wall. “Like, really.”

“Oh, fuck off, you stupid ginger.” El cried out, flicking off Max, “Stupid ginger. That likes animals.”

“Oh my god, you are so drunk.” Max sighed, pressing a hand to her forehead. “I’m going to have to pay for a cab.”

“I’ll pay for it.”

“El, you just bought the entire bar a round of *shots*, you can’t pay for jack *shit*.”

“They wanted the shots!” She said, standing up and wiping her mouth with her hand. “Who am I to – to deny someone a – a shit?”

“You mean shot?”

“Shit.”

“Okay.” Max sighed, flushing the toilet and pulling El over to the sink. “Wash your mouth out.”

“No.”

“*EL*.” Max said, turning on the faucet and pointing to it. “*Now*.”

“Everyone treats me like a baby.” El said, filling her hand with water and sipping it, swishing it around in her mouth before spitting it out.

“Twenty-one-year-olds go out to bars and get blackout drunk. Not twenty-five-year-olds.” Max muttered, and El turned the faucet off and grabbed a paper towel, wiping her face with it.

“Don’t be so fucking mean to me.” El said, sniffing and turning away. “I’m mourning.”

“What could you possibly be mourning?!” Max laughed, her hands going into the air, “I had no idea you were such a crazy drunk –”

“I lost the – the love of my *life*.” El whispered, sniffing again. Max’s eyes went wide, and El burst into tears.

“Oh my god. Mike? You’re upset about *Mike*?”

“Y-Y-Yes!” El cried, her hands going up to her eyes. Someone banged on the bathroom door and Max huffed, turning to yell.

“*GIVE ME A FUCKING MINUTE!*” She turned back to El and grabbed another paper towel, using it to wipe the tears and snot from El’s



face. "Are you serious? It's been years –"

"Four years. And – and – I love him. I still love him. Why do I still love him? He just left me. He didn't even care about me enough to stay."

"El, he loves you." Max said, tossing the paper towel into the trashcan. "Mike loves you."

"No he doesn't! He – he never called, he never visited, he – *he probably has a new girlfriend now and they're probably engaged and getting married* –"

"We're going home." Max said, shaking her head and turning to open the door. "Come on."

"I don't want to!" El said, pulling Max back. More pounding on the door.

"*I HAVE MY FUCKING PERIOD!*" Max screamed, and the pounding stopped. Max turned toward El. "El, my love, you are drunk. You are so drunk. You need to go to bed."

"I don't want to go to bed. I don't want to be alone." She whispered, wrapping her arms around herself. She was weeping, shivering in the stupid, disgusting bar bathroom. Max didn't know what to do.

Her own heart was breaking, watching El sob, a drunken, slobbery mess.

In the four years they'd been broken up, El had hidden it so well. She'd been fine, for the most part, if only getting a bit quieter. She'd still been El.

But the person in this bathroom wasn't El. Not the El that Max knew.

"I'll sleep with you." Max sighed, pulling El toward her and wrapping her in a hug. "We'll have a little sleepover. I won't leave you alone."

"Promise?" El asked, her face pressed into Max's neck.

"Yeah." Max sighed, staring at the wall and cursing Mike Wheeler,

“Promise.”

---

### **Spring, 1994 – Two weeks later**

“Are you coming?” Max asked, pulling her backpack on; inside, two bottles of wine and one of champagne. In her hands, she was carrying a dish of brownies.

Lucas was having a little housewarming get-together. He’d invited Max and El, and some guy from his work.

El glanced up at Max from her seat on the couch, her eyes glued to an episode of *Days of Our Lives*. She was in a t-shirt and shorts, her hair a mess, pulled out of her face in a ridiculous nest-like bun.

“I can wait for you, if you wanted to change or something –”

“I’m okay.” El said, pressing her lips into a thin smile. “I’ll be fine.”

“So – no?”

“Not tonight.” El replied, turning back to the television. Max sighed and walked toward the door – “Bring me back something, okay?”

“Okay.” Max said, glancing back to look at El. “Eat, okay?”

“I will.” El replied, turning back to look at her.

“Please.”

“I *will*.” El sighed, moving on the couch to lay down.

Max slipped out the door; and an hour later, El was asleep.

And three hours later, Max was back.

“El, wake up.” Max said, shaking her shoulder. “El.”

El rolled over on the couch and tugged the blanket up over her; beyond Max, someone chuckled.

El shot up on the couch.

"I brought you something back." Max said, pointing to him.

Mike Wheeler was standing with his hands fisted in the pockets of his jeans, dressed up in a dark green hoodie. The same freckles, the same too-long hair. Pale skin, crooked smile.

"What the fuck?" El asked, looking up toward Max. "What the fuck?" She asked again, spitting it in Mike's direction. That stupid smile was still plastered on his face, like he hadn't done anything wrong. Like this was all perfectly okay, being in her – *her* apartment, *her* space.

*Hers. Tainted with him.*

"Get the fuck out." El said, pointing toward the door and standing up on shaking legs. "Get out."

"I wanted to talk." He said, his voice quivering. *Good*, El thought, crossing her arms and staring at him, *he's just as scared as I am.*

"I'm sick of this." Max said, standing between them. "I can't have my best friend miserable, and Lucas can't fucking handle you anymore, either, Mike. Talk it out. Get it *over with*."

"What are you talking about?" El asked, staring at Max. "What are you going on about?"

"I missed you." Mike said, raising a hand to rub the back of his neck. *Idiot.*

"Shut up." El whispered. Max rolled her eyes and headed for her own bedroom, glancing back at the two of them.

"Fix it."

"Fix *what*?" El scoffed, glaring at Mike. "*He* broke it."

"Me?" Mike laughed, pressing a hand to his chest. "You told me to leave."

"I told you to leave because I wanted you to *stay*." El said through gritted teeth. Max's bedroom door shut; and then – *click*. The lock. "You think you can come back, after all these years and just –"

“I don’t expect you to forgive me. But we never even broke up –”

“I would say that not talking to me for four fucking years equals breaking up.” El said, falling back against the couch. Her legs were too weak to hold her up. How was she supposed to do this? How was she –

He sat down next to her, and his hand moved to grab onto hers.

She pulled it away and turned toward him. *Oh my god*, she thought, his eyes glassy, *is he going to do this to me? Really?*

“You’re not totally innocent in this, El. I fucked up, but – but you did, too.” He whispered, raising a hand to wipe away a tear as it fell.

She bit down on the inside of her cheek, willing herself not to cry. She would not cry over Mike Wheeler. She was done crying over Mike Wheeler. She was done – done –

And then tears, of course. *Stupid bullshit feelings*, she thought, wiping her own away with shaking hands.

“I thought we were going to be together forever.” El said, sniffing and fisting her hands in the couch cushions, her nails digging into the fabric. “I thought you loved me.”

“I do love you.” Mike said, “I love you. I always loved you.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I promised you.” Mike said, slipping off the couch to sit in front of her. “I promised you that I would always love you. And I do. I wouldn’t be – sitting here on my knees *begging* for you to listen to me if I didn’t.”

El stared at him.

He was right. He had to be right, and she – she had to forgive him, didn’t she? She felt it in her heart and her stomach and every bit of her. He was Mike, she was El. He was her Mike. She was his El. That’s the way it had always been, that’s the way this shit always had to be, didn’t it?

“Then explain.”

“I had to do what was best for me. I had to take that internship, but they kept coming and coming and –”

“And?”

“And I didn’t know how to talk to you. How to apologize. How to come back after leaving you. It was so – *stupid*, but –”

“You had to do it.”

“I did. I had to do what was best for me, because it would be best for you, too, you know? Because I – I wanted to be at the top, and get a really good job, so we could – we could get back together, and I could take care of you, and –”

“I was selfish.” El said, thinking about Mike working to get a good job to support her (*idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot*), and then her, just -- *damn it!*

“No, you were –”

“I was.” El said, glancing away. Mike’s hand lifted up to her cheek (a perfect fit), and her eyes moved back to him.

“We both made mistakes. But we’re here now, together.”

“You want to get back together?” El asked, moving his hand. It fell to her knee, slipped around her thigh. She moved a hand to his face (*instinct*), and brushed her thumb against his jaw. “I spent years crying over you –”

“You never moved on?”

“How could I?”

“I never dated anyone else.”

El stared at him – managed, just barely – “Friends don’t lie.”

“Yeah.” He nodded, his other hand moving up to brush her hair out

of her face. "They don't." She tilted her face toward him, and their forehead knocked together.

The Snow Ball, all those years ago.

"You are so beautiful." He whispered, staring at her.

Her heart hammered in her chest. "You too, Mike."

Their lips were pressed together, and his hands were lifting her up underneath her thighs. She was standing on the couch, pressed against him, fitting into his body like two puzzle pieces.

His hands moved to her waist and pulled her into him, her fingers into his hair; if they could read each other's minds, they'd know they were thinking the same thought.

*Finally. Finally. Finally.*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

1) thank you for reading!!!!, 2) leave a comment or kudos if you liked it, your comments make my day and they honestly make my heart so warm and fuzzy and okhodsioih 3) sooooo..... plot..... still don't know if it's happening or not LOL i just have a lot going on. this whole fic is kind of based off my own anxieties and fears so this was really nice to write and kind of get some of that out. but anyways i've got a lot goin on, not sure where this is going, and it's nice to just write things.

ty for reading again and have a lovely day!!!! my tumblr is @timetravl, hmu if u want ;)

## 7. the world caved in on us when we needed it the most

### Summary for the Chapter:

mike and el; el and mike, just as how it always been  
--  
and no matter what, how it would always be.

OR

neighbors to friends to lovers au

### Notes for the Chapter:

tw. for character death.  
i cried writing this.  
bye

### I.

Mike stared at the house across the street. A girl was sitting out in the yard, picking at flower-weeds and tucking them into her other palm. Her hair was tied into two short braids on either side of her head, her pink dress stopping past her knees.

He couldn't stop staring.

She glanced up and nearly caught his eye, and he ducked behind the curtain in the dining room and prayed she hadn't seen him. When he poked his head out to look again, she was still staring – this time, a smile plastered across her face.

And then she was running across the street.

She stopped in his driveway and turned. A big, burly man left the front door and crossed his arms. He yelled something at her – something that sounded like: “What do you think you’re doing?”

She replied too softly for him to hear, and pointed at the window. Mike ducked his head again, this time falling to his knees in front of

the window.

And then a knock at his door.

He stood up slowly and walked around the corner. He approached the door slowly. The knock had been too quiet to disturb his mother, who was chattering on the phone in the kitchen, or his sister Nancy, who was working on her homework in the living room.

But he heard it.

He unlocked the door and pulled it open.

She was standing there, the same height as him, her hands full of flower-weeds. She held them out to him in one hand, her other hand moving to grab at her skirt, balling it up in her hand nervously, the way he did with his own shirt sometimes when he had to speak to adults.

"I'm El!" She said, and he took the flowers from her (sticky with palm-sweat, because it was summer) and smiled back at her.

"I'm Mike. Uh – Wheeler."

"Oh! Hopper." She said, grinning at him. "I just moved in."

"Yeah, I saw the truck." Mike replied, pointing to the big white moving van parked in her driveway. "Was that your dad?"

"Yeah." She said, rolling her eyes up to the ceiling and letting them sit there. "He's so weird."

"It's okay." Mike nodded, opening the door a bit wider. "My dad's weird, too. And my mom. And my sister."

"You have a sister?" El asked, eyes going wide, "I don't have anyone!"

"You're an only child?" He asked, and El wrinkled her nose and nodded.

"Yeah. It gets lonely." She said, shifting on her feet, kicking one of



them at the *welcome* mat on his front porch.

She was wearing scuffed, old mary-janes. He could see where she'd written on them with black Crayola marker, and the markings hadn't washed off completely where her dad had probably scrubbed at them.

*EL HOPPER.* With a little rabbit next to it.

"Do you want to come in?" Mike asked, opening the door all the way and turning around. "I have a bunch of card games, and board games, and movies, and I have a basement –"

"My dad said I can't stay over." El replied, and Mike couldn't hide the frown that fell on his lips.

"Oh. Okay."

"But I can go back and ask if I can come over later." She suggested, pointing her thumb toward her house. "If that's okay?"

"Yeah!" Mike grinned, nodding.

"And if he says no, we can always see each other at school, right?" El asked, biting on her lip.

"Hawkins Elementary?"

"Yeah, I'm in Mrs. Sullivan's second-grade class –"

"**NO WAY!**" Mike practically yelled, a grin plastered across his face. "Me too! You can hang out with me and my friend Will at recess –"

"Okay!" El said, practically jumping with excitement. "That sounds like so much fun! But I'm going to go ask my dad if we can just hang out now, okay? So –"

"Okay!" Mike said, nodding at her as she turned around and ran down the walkway, and then down the driveway. She skidded to a stop at the end of the driveway, looked both ways, and crossed the road back to her own house.

Mike shut the door and looked down at the flowers in his hand. He thought Nancy had said something about pressing flowers before –

He went upstairs to the bathroom and grabbed some toilet paper, and then went to his room. He wrapped the flowers in the paper and snuck into Nancy's room.

He took two encyclopedias and went to his room, sticking the tissue-wrapped flowers between them and then shoving the mass under his bed.

Another knock at the door.

He ran down the stairs, two steps at a time, and yanked open the door.

El, and this time, her father. Next to her. The biggest guy Mike had ever seen, but smiling down at him nonetheless.

"Hey, kid." He said, leaning against the doorway and pressing a hand against El's head. She was grinning at Mike, as if her dad wasn't absolutely terrifying. "Got any parents around here?"

"Uh – my mom. In the kitchen."

"Wanna go get her?"

Mike stared up at him a moment more before nodding, taking a few steps back and nearly falling against the stairs. He turned around and ran to the kitchen, tugging at his mom's sleeve. She batted at his hand and covered the phone with her palm, turning to him – "Michael!"

"Someone's here to talk to you!" Mike said, standing up on his toes.

"Tell them we don't need a new vacuum cleaner, or –"

"No, mom! New neighbors –"

"Oh!"

Mrs. Wheeler said something into the phone and put it back on the

receiver, followed Mike out of the kitchen and to the door.

“Hello!” Mrs. Wheeler said, sticking her hand out to shake El’s dad’s hand. “Mike, maybe you and – sorry, sweetie, what’s your name?”

“El!” She said, grinning at her. Mike grinned when El did, as if her smile were infectious.

“Mike, maybe you and El can go –” Mrs. Wheeler had only halfway suggested something before Mike had grabbed El’s hand, and was dragging her to the basement.

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## II.

Seven, eight, nine –

El would run across the street (looking both ways before) to Mike’s house on the weekends. Will’s mom would drive him over until he turned nine and she bought him a bike.

They would sit in the basement. Monopoly, Life, Dominoes, cards –

When their parents gave them quarters, they’d pretend how to play poker. The boys would tease El about taking all of her money, but somehow Mike always ended up giving his coins to El and Will got to keep all of his original ones except one.

El would grin and laugh at them, and it would be worth it.

And then ten.

They’re laying out on a blanket by the lake, Mike squished between El and Will on the tiny blanket. They’ve gone swimming but they’re tired now, mad because it’s a Sunday and they’ll have to go home before dusk and face one of their last days of fifth grade tomorrow.

It’s spring. El can feel the sunlight on her skin, and she has her arm against her forehead, her finger moving in the air above her body as she traces the shapes of clouds.

“Duck.” She said, pointing to one. Mike tilted his head a bit closer to hers, his wet, cold hair brushing against her cheek.

“Don’t see it.” Mike replied, and she turned toward him. He was squinting, as if he was trying really hard – and then she realized his eyes weren’t even open at all.

“Hey!” El laughed, elbowing him in the ribs. He yelped but laughed along with her.

“Guys.” Will said, picking up his watch and looking at the time. “I’ve got to go.”

“Don’t!” El whined, pouting and turning on her side to look across Mike at him. “How come?”

“Jonathan and I are going to dinner with my dad.” Will mumbled, and El’s pout dissipated into a frown. His dad.

“You really should get your mom over to my house soon.” El said, watching the look on Will’s face flicker from vague sadness to amusement. “She and my dad have *got* to get together.”

“I know. My mom hasn’t had a boyfriend in a long time.” Will said, sitting up and turning over, standing to tug his t-shirt on. He fastened his watch onto his wrist and grabbed his backpack, mucked up with dirt and lake water. “See you guys tomorrow?”

“Bye, Will!” Mike said, sitting up to wave – and then, “Wait! You forgot your comic book at my house.”

“Just bring it tomorrow!” Will called out, already crossing the small field to his bike. He raised a hand to wave, got onto the bike – and then they were alone.

Mike and El laid back down on the blanket, their sides still pressed against each other’s despite all the new room. She laid her arm across her forehead again, continued cloud-gazing –

“You know, I – really – I’m glad that we’re friends.” Mike said, so quietly she wasn’t sure the words had come from him. She turned her head and moved her arm, letting it fall against the blanket.

His hand.

And hers. Holding each other, now, because their fingers were moving and winding together in a way she'd always wondered about but never felt.

"I'm glad we're friends, too." El said, but the word *friend* didn't feel right. "I was scared of not having anyone when I moved here."

"I wouldn't have let that happen." Mike said, a smile crossing his lips. "And now you have me forever."

"Forever?" El laughed, turning her face away. She was blushing, she was sure. "That's a long time. A big promise."

"But I do promise you that." Mike said, and their hands moved so it was just their pinkies, interlocked. A pinkie promise. The most sacred of promises. One they had determined was punishable by comic-burning and VHS-smashing if broken.

"Mike." El said, turning her head again to look at him – he was still gazing at her, but his eyes were different, and she could feel her heart beating in her chest. His name was on her lips but she couldn't manage to get it out –

Mostly because he leaned forward and kisses her, short and sweet, in the way she'd seen girls kiss boys on the playground during dares or after school before getting into their cars to go home, or on different buses.

Boyfriend didn't feel right for Mike either, when El tested it in her head (but it did feel better than friend; she could admit that much).

"I'm sorry." Mike said, shifting on the blanket and scooting away from her slightly. She squeezed his hand and tried to pull him back, her lips twisting into a frown.

"Don't be." El said, and he turned and looked at her again.

She offered him a smile. He took it, and smiled back.

---

### III.

Why would he think anything would change?

She was still El. She was still El, who had always been oblivious to other people's feelings. El, who excelled in connecting to people but lacked in understanding them.

El, who was the apple of his stupid fucking eye. Mike frowned down at his sheets, ignored the chattering of his friends at the table.

El, who hadn't been invited to their game of Dungeons and Dragons, because the other boys thought she wouldn't like it.

El, who he had grown apart from since fifth grade. Since the lake. The stupid cloud-gazing, with her stupid curly hair going everywhere because of that gross lake water, and her warm skin and her smile and –

Mike broke his pencil lead. His friends glanced up at him.

"You don't think it's rude we didn't invite her?" Mike asked, tossing his pencil onto the table.

"You're *still* on that?" Dustin asked, slumping down in his chair. "Dude, she wouldn't even like DnD."

"It's a fact. Girls hate Dungeons and Dragons." Lucas said, staring down at his papers. "Nancy won't even play with us."

"She did that one time." Will replied, and Lucas scoffed and shook his head.

"A *year* ago." Dustin pointed out, rolling his eyes and lifting a hand to adjust the brim of his hat. "It's not *cool* anymore. We're the only nerds in Hawkins that even like it –"

"I think she would like it." Mike said, sitting up a bit in his chair. "Do you guys – not like her, or something?"

Dustin and Lucas met gazes across the table and then turned to Mike. They shook their heads in unison, as if any other action would lead to Certain Death.

Mike rolled his eyes into oblivion. He loved Lucas and Dustin (it was great to have more guys around that actually *liked* the same things that he and Will liked) but they were more secretive than Will had been.

If things were bothering them, they wouldn't say anything. That sucked.

"What is it?" Mike asked, his brow furrowing. "Is it because she's a girl?"

"No!" Lucas said, waving a hand around. "No, we *love* girls –"

"No shit, Lucas." Dustin huffed, leaning forward to try and get his piece in. "It's just that – when she's around..."

"You don't, uh..."

"Focus. On anything."

"Except for her." Lucas said, wincing as he finished his sentence. The table was quiet. Will was staring wide-eyed at Mike, and Mike was staring at Lucas like he'd just said they were living in a dream sequence.

"...that's not true." Mike said, the words sour in his mouth and tainted with lie.

El was pretty, and funny. The prettiest girl he'd ever seen. Best smile. She was compassionate, kind, and she listened to him talk about the things he liked even if she didn't like them. She would read things he gave her and even if she didn't like them, she'd still pretend to be just as excited as she knew he wanted her to be.

She cared about him, obviously. And he obviously cared about her, too.

But he didn't like her or anything. That wasn't – no.

“Mike.” Will said, his voice quiet, struggling to get any louder – as if he knew what was coming would upset him. Mike’s stomach flipped. “It’s true.”

“It’s *not*.” Mike replied, balling his fists up in his lap under the table.

He didn’t like El Hopper. Not like that. She was his friend. One of his best friends – at one point, his absolute best friend. He – well.

He loved her, he supposed.

The l-word made his heart practically burst out of his chest, and he had to take a deep breath to try and calm himself down. The other boys were staring at him, as if they could see how nervous he was, how much this was affecting him.

He wanted to tell them to look away, but he knew they probably couldn’t.

Shit. Mike stared down at his papers, shuffled them, reached for the pencil sharpener in the center of the table.

“I don’t like her like that.” Mike said, sticking his pencil into the sharpener and twisting it. “It’s not like that. And it’s not – not fair of you guys to assume that. Because if I ever liked a girl, I would tell you guys –”

“You wouldn’t need to.” Dustin replied, looking down at his papers. “It’s pretty obvious.”

Mike turned back to his sheets, tapped his newly-sharpened pencil tip against the table to smooth it out. “Listen, are we going to finish this campaign, or not?”

Lucas looked up at him.

“I’d like to.”

“Okay.” Mike said, glancing around at all of them. “Then let’s.”

---



#### IV.

“Who?”

“Your boyfriend.”

El stared at Max across the table. They were sitting in a booth, one of them on either side, El sucking on a chocolate milkshake and Max working her way through a plate of salty fries.

Max was new, had no friends, and El was desperate to talk to someone besides Mike or Will or Dustin or Lucas for the first time in – *forever*.

But there were still some things Max hadn’t figured out in her three weeks at Hawkins.

And one of them, El guessed, was that Mike Wheeler was most *definitely* not her *boyfriend*.

“I don’t have a boyfriend.” El said, shaking her head and shoving her milkshake straw into her mouth. Max reached over and plucked the cherry off the top. She pushed it into her mouth.

They were in the ninth grade. Fourteen. Fourteen years, and El had never seen someone tie a cherry stem in their mouth with their tongue.

But Max put the whole cherry in her mouth, made a few weird faces, and out the tied stem came, stuck onto the edge of her plate.

“That’s what they teach you in California?” El asked, raising an eyebrow at Max. Max laughed and kicked her leg under the table.

“Shut up. That’s not all.” Max said, shoving another fry into her mouth. “For someone who isn’t your boyfriend, that one Bike kid stares at you a lot.”

“Mike, not bike.”

“He *rides* a bike.”

“Doesn’t mean his name is Bike.” El said, moving her straw around in her glass. She swiped her thumb along the glass, gathered up dew on her finger, reached over and swiped it against Max’s hand.

She pulled away and scowled at El. El just grinned.

“He’s – okay. Nice, I mean. Kind of a dick to me when I first met him.”

“He’s bad at girls.” El replied. Max tilted her head and pursed her lips, leaning forward.

“Really? Then how come he’s got you all wrapped around his finger –”

“I’m *not*. And he doesn’t like me like that either. We’ve just been friends for a really long time.” El huffed.

She left out the parts about how she and Mike had been each other’s first kiss and promised to be friends forever, and she especially left out the bit about how he took her to the Snow Ball last year and they slow-danced to *Every Breath You Take* but she pulled away before the end of the song because she thought he was leaning in to kiss her.

Mike didn’t like her like that. She – well, did she want him to like her like that?

Kind of. And maybe he did, if she squinted.

But Mike was nice to all of his friends, and he didn’t particularly treat her any differently than the rest of the boys, besides excluding her from Dungeons and Dragons games – and then making it up to her by watching movies and working on homework with just her in his basement on Sunday mornings.

“Friends can always turn into something more.” Max said, shrugging and shoving a fry into her mouth. She nudged the plate toward El and took a sip of her coke. “Want one?”

“I’m okay.” El said. Her milkshake was half finished, but she might vomit if she took another sip. Her stomach was currently doing flips.

“Sorry.” Max said, nudging her foot under the table to get her attention when El started staring at the inside of her glass instead of Max. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s okay.” El said, glancing up and offering her a short smile. A fake smile.

Max bought it, relaxed, smiled back. “So, did you see what Mrs. Flannigan assigned on Friday?”

---

V.

Midnight.

El’s sixteenth birthday.

Mike was being stupid. Really stupid. So stupid that he honestly couldn’t even *believe* he was being so stupid.

The cellophane was crinkling in his hands, and the card and present were shoved into his backpack. The tulips wouldn’t fit, so he had to carry them –

But he failed to think about the fact that he was going to have to scale her house with them in his hand.

Mike – 0

Hopper for not putting anything remotely tall next to his house so his daughter could sneak out or Mike could sneak in – 1

Mike tossed the flowers up onto the roof below El’s window. They landed with a soft *thud* – and much to his surprise, didn’t roll off. He walked around the yard for a bit until he found a big wooden crate they’d used as a clubhouse (back when they were nine, but Hopper didn’t really take care of the yard like he should) and stuck it under the roof.

He could barely make it. If only he could lift himself up.

He grabbed onto the roof and pulled, but his non-athleticism was really getting him here. The window above him clicked – slid open – and El slipped her head out, groggy from sleep.

“Mike?” She said, blinking a few times and rubbing at her eyes. Her curly hair was tied up with a scrunchie. She was in a huge shirt, probably one of Hopper’s, and he could see her plaid pajama pants peeking out from under it.

He smiled. Adorable.

“Happy birthday.” He said, tapping his hand against the roof so she’d look and see the flowers. She gasped and reached for them, immediately pulling them over and hugging them to her chest. The plastic crinkled and she buried her face in them, sniffing. “Sweet sixteen!”

“Thank you, Mike.” El said, setting the flowers down inside the house. “Are you trying to come in?”

Mike shifted on the crate; it creaked, and he winced. El reached a hand out and wrapped it around his wrist. Mike jumped, pulled hard with one arm while El pulled with hers –

They got him halfway onto the roof, and he managed to shimmy across the space and duck inside her window. She shut it behind him quietly, latched it, and tip-toed to the door to lock it.

Mike set his backpack on her bed and looked around the room.

It’d been a while since he’d been in her bedroom. It was different now, because they were sophomores and – they were – you know.

Boy and girl. Things were just – different.

He stared at the taped-up pictures of him and Will and her from when they were kids; ones of her dad and her during birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving.

One of her dad and Will’s mom, since they’d started dating. Which they’d convinced Mike was the best thing since sliced bread, because Will and El would probably end up being brother and sister someday.

Her bedspread was pink, quilted, ruffled from sleep and as if she never made her bed. It was small, twin-sized, but she crawled back into bed and patted the spot next to her so he could sit.

He sat down next to her and she pointed to his shoes; he tugged them off and set them softly next to her bed, and then stuck his legs under the blankets next to hers.

In her bed. Sixteen. Boy and girl.

Mike would be lying if he said he weren't nervous, scared not just because of the situation at hand but because of all the stuff he'd written in the card. All the – thought he'd put into the present. All of the love that was there, too.

It'd been nine years since they met.

She ought to know by now, if not just by assumption, that when he looked at her he saw more than his friend. El looked up at him, and her head tilted onto his shoulder and rested there, the flower plastic crinkling in her lap.

He reached for his backpack and unzipped it, pulled out a wrapped shoebox and a card.

“Uh...” he stared at the two items, then pressed the card into her hand. “That first.”

El stuck her pinkie under the slit and ripped open the envelope, tugged out the card – homemade.

“Aw, *Mike!*” She squealed, leaning over to nudge her nose against his cheek (almost a kiss, and he would most *definitely* take what he could get with her) and turned back to the card.

It was a messy crayon drawing of the two of them, made in proper second-grade fashion. She opened it and gasped at the inside – decorated fully with crayons, glitter, and markers.

And a little note.

*El,*

*You're getting old, but you still know how to keep promises. We made a promise six years ago, and we both kept it, and nothing in the world makes me happier.*

*Of all the people in the entire world that could have moved across from me, I'm glad it was you.*

*Love,*

*Mike*

*p.s. Happy Birthday, and please share some cake with me later*

El giggled, and when he moved his face to look at hers, she was teary-eyed. He blushed, moved his hand to rub at the back of his neck. El leaned over and gave him a proper kiss on the cheek this time, one of her hands reaching for the other side of his face to hold him there for a moment.

"You are the sweetest, Mike." She said, grinning and pressing the card to her chest. "This is the best card anyone has ever given me."

"Not better than the pop-up card Dustin made you last year."

"The one that scared the hell out of me?" El laughed, biting down on her lip to keep from being too loud. "Yeah, I guess this one's a *close* second to that one."

"Shut up." Mike said, and she pressed her elbow into his side. "Now the present."

El took the shoebox out of his lap and carefully unwrapped it, as if the pink striped wrapping paper was worth saving. The wrapping job was rather shoddy, because he couldn't really ask his mom or dad for help with wrapping a present like this.

El pulled out the shoebox, laughed at the way he'd covered it in glitter glue and written, messily, *for el hopper's sixteenth birthday* in one corner, and signed it *from michael wheeler* in the other.

"Michael Wheeler?" She said, arching her eyebrows upward and turning to him. "Are you rebranding?"

"I wanted it to be serious." He said, waving a hand at her. "Go on, open it."

El slowly slid the lid off the box, and rifled through the tissue paper for a moment before tugging out a much smaller box. Black velvet.

"Shut up." El said, turning to him. "You didn't buy me like –"

"Just open it." He said, nudging her. "Please."

"Okay, okay." She said, and the box snapped open on hinges.

A charm bracelet; three charms. A bike, a pair of mary-janes – and an M. For Mike. From Mike.

El stared at it, pretty silver, with a tiny little diamond on the M. She slipped it out of the box and handed it to him, sticking her wrist out.

He put it around her wrist, clasped it, and tugged on it to make sure it was secured.

"You like it?" He asked, looking up to meet her eyes.

She was crying (just barely, two tears slipping down her cheeks as her bottom lip quivered). She wiped the tears away and sniffed.

"Mike, this is the best present I've ever gotten."

"Don't just say that."

"I'm *not*." She said sternly, her hands reaching for his. He looked down at their hands for a second, and then back up at her face. "Mike."

"Yeah?" He said, his heart thumping in his chest.

She was looking at him in a way. The way he caught her looking when they did homework or when he walked her home at night or that time when they kissed at the lake.

She probably didn't even know she was doing it. But inside, it was making him melt.

“Mike, I – um, I – I. Fuck.” El said, the words getting caught in her throat. She laughed slightly, shook her head, and lifted a hand to his cheek. “Just – thank you.”

She leaned forward, but he met her halfway.

They kissed, but it wasn't short and sweet like the first time. The only other time, so many years ago. Not that either of them had kissed anyone else in all those years –

Because they hadn't. Only each other.

El's hands moved to Mike's cheeks and she pulled him into her. His arms wound around her waist and she turned toward him, shifted on the bed; they laid down, pressed into each other, his lips leaving hers just to press another kiss to her forehead, her nose, her cheeks.

She kissed him on the lips again, her hand balling up in the fabric of his t-shirt, his hands moving to mess with the curls of her hair. Out came the scrunchie, and his fingers were tangled in it.

“Mike.” She whispered against his lips, eyes closed tight. He kissed her jaw, her neck. She made some kind of noise, their legs moving under the covers, and suddenly he had a leg between her knees, and – “Mike.”

A bit louder this time. He started to move away from her, but she grabbed his arm to try and keep him where he was.

“You okay?” He asked her, and she stared at him with glassy eyes.

“I – I, um...” El licked her lips, and he moved to rest his weight on his arms as he leaned over her, his long hair brushing against her forehead. “I love you.”

The world stopped turning.

His heart stopped beating.

“I love you, too.” Without missing a single beat. Immediately, like he'd waited his whole life to say it (and he really, really had). She leaned up to kiss him again, harder this time, her hands at his sides,



pulling him down. "I love you." He said, again, against her ear as she kissed his neck, her fingers fumbling and carting through his hair. Shivers. "I fucking love you, El Hopper."

"Promise?" She said, breathless. He pressed a hand to her cheek, his forehead against hers.

"Promise." He replied, nodding and shutting his eyes for a moment.

"Forever."

"Yeah." He said, pressing another kiss to her lips. "Forever."

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## VI.

When you're sixteen, seventeen, eighteen – you think you're invincible.

Mike stared down at the casket.

He knew now that this wasn't the truth.

Her dad dropped a tulip into the hole, bright yellow. It landed on the black casket silently, and he turned toward Mrs. Byers and sobbed into her hair.

She held him tight with pale hands and pale arms, her own tears rolling down her face.

Mike wasn't sure he knew how to cry anymore.

He wanted to blame her, because looking both ways before crossing the street was the easiest thing to do. But he had to blame himself. He'd invited her over. He'd told her he had a surprise for her, so of course she was excited.

It was his fault, in a way. Her dad didn't think that.

But Mike always would.

Mike leaned down and dropped a pink tulip onto the casket, her favorite color. The same color as her lips and her cheeks and her skin when she was sunburnt; the same color as her heart. The flowers he'd brought her on her sixteenth birthday, the love they'd shared in the two years since.

Max was sobbing next to him, a noise he'd never heard her make. Lucas had an arm wrapped around one of her shoulder's, Dustin standing close next to her. Will was on the other side of Mike, tears rolling down his cheeks, his eyes red and bloodshot.

The two of them had been crying for days now.

The others started to drop tulips onto her casket, one by one, and Mike reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a letter.

Before they started to shovel the dirt, he leaned over and dropped it into the hole. When he looked up, Hopper was staring at him.

Hopper turned and opened his arms, and Mike stepped forward and into his embrace.

Mike sobbed into Hopper's chest, clinging to his dress shirt. The older man wrapped his arms around Mike tight, held him close. He muttered something against Mike's hair, words that didn't matter, words that weren't true.

"It'll be okay."

And in a way, it would be. The world would go on. Life would go on. She'd want it that way.

But she was the light and the sun and the moon and the stars. She was the reason the world seemed to spin and the reason that Mike was okay with living with his shitty parents and his annoying little sister. She was the reason he was getting through senior year.

They were supposed to go to prom in three weeks.

Mike screamed into Hopper's shoulder and suddenly Mrs. Byers was behind him, combing her fingers through his hair and whispering things he couldn't hear.

Faintly, Mike could hear the dirt falling against the casket.

And Will at his side, hugging him and crying into his shoulder. And Max, Dustin, and Lucas.

All of the people that had loved her the most.

Things would never be the same.

But they would still be.

And that, Mike realized, was probably what hurt the most.

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## VII.

Dear El,

First and foremost, my love. You are my love. My one and only. My first kiss and my last. I know you would want me to move on or whatever, find someone else that can make me happy, but you have to know I can't.

I won't. It's just not possible.

But I'm okay with that. I made you a promise. I promised you forever, twice. Forever friends. Forever love.

I have loved you forever. When you stepped into my house – my life – I didn't realize that you would stay forever. I didn't realize that fate was at work. That the universe was bursting and that I was, at seven years old, staring at my soulmate.

When the guys wouldn't let you play DnD with us, I fought for you. When we didn't have any of the same classes in the eighth grade, I got my schedule switched so we'd see each other at least once a day. Even when we got too big for my bike, I still promised you I'd let you ride on the back. It was hard to pedal with the two of us, because I'd gotten kind of tall, but it was worth it to hear you scream when I went down hills really fast.

When we didn't kiss at the Snow Ball, I was crushed.

But when we kissed in your bedroom, it felt like my entire life suddenly made sense. Like all of the confusion and frustration I'd gone through for years trying to figure out why the only girl I could think about was you – it made sense.

Junior prom was amazing. There's no one I'd rather get beer-drunk with in the junkyard than you, El Hopper. Watching you shotgun a beer and call Dustin a dumbass when he couldn't do the same will always be the funniest thing I've ever seen.

Senior prom and graduation would have been better. Perfect.

If you lived, we would have gone to college together. We would get an apartment together, and I would have proposed to you in about a year, and then waited another three to marry you.

We'd have had kids, with the names you liked. Louise and Katie. Or Louis and Katie, if a boy and a girl. Just like we talked about.

We'd visit Max and Lucas in California and Dustin in Texas and Will would end up being our neighbor. And we would live happily ever after.

But you didn't live. You died. And I'm sorry.

I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry that you did, because it's not fair. The world isn't fair. It gives you good things, brilliant things, perfect things. It lets you fall in love over and over and over and then it rips people away from you when you need them the most.

El, I love you. I love you so much. I love you so much that it hurts. I can't do anything but think about it.

But I'll be okay.

As heartbroken and depressed and – and as sad as I am without you – it's okay.

I'll be okay, or okay enough, and I'll still go to college like you wanted and do the things I want to do. And I'll make sure to keep our promises, because I don't break promises.

And neither do you.

I'll take care of your dad. I promise. I'll keep going. I promise.

And in seventy-something years – I'll see you again.

I promise.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

- Mike

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

yeah i'm emo and am having a rough day. i started this at three in the morning and just finished it, so my apologies for any errors or just like -- bad grammar or anything LOL i didn't feel like proofreading it.

anyways. thank you for reading this. thank you if you leave a comment or a message. i read all of them, and they really make my entire day and week and month and year and life. i love all of you. my tumblr is @upsydedown. byee <3

UPDATTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTE:

thank you all. so much. for making this my chapter with the most comments on it. i really thought everyone would hate this chapter and think it was bad or stupid but all of your comments (despite most of them breaking my heart gsdoiHgsoihgs) mean the LITERALLLLLLL world to me. o h my god. they have really made this past day amazing for me. i love u all so much thank you SO FUCKING MUCH for reading. ok bye

### **Author's Note:**

this is probably going to be part of like a series or something where i make up a bunch of different au's / or maybe it won't be because this typically isn't my thing!!! but plz let me know what you thought in the comments or via kudos :-)) and if you wanna chat or anything my tumblr is @timetravl, and i'm almost always online lol anyways have a great day lovelies! <3 and thanks for reading!!!